

Story by
FUNA

Art by
Touzai

Saving
80,000
Gold
in
Another
World
for My
Retirement

3



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Colette and Sabine Meet

This is Colette,
a candidate to
become one of
my vassals.
We live together
at my county
residence.

This is Sabine,
the third princess.

When Mitsuha introduced
them that way, Colette
stiffened and Sabine glared at
the other girl as if she were a
mortal enemy.

Charge of the *Good Ship Lollipop!*

“HOW DARE YOU
BLOCK OUR PATH!”

BANDITS, THROW DOWN
YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER
AT ONCE, LEST YOU BE STRUCK
BY LIGHTNING!”

Hooooonk!
Honk! Honk!

A deafening claxon blared,
and the bandits and caravan
members turned to see a
massive object speeding toward
them down the roadway.

It looked like a giant monster,
but then again like some kind
of bizarre carriage.





Sabine's Feelings

*Wait, what? Are those tears
in Sabine's eyes?*

Oww! That hurts!

*I don't have much defensive
padding on my chest...
Hey, you there, pipe down!*

Story by **FUNA** Art by **Touzai**



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KODANSHA

Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement 3

A VERTICAL Book

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KODANSHA

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Chapter 31

Preparation

It had been three weeks since the hellish board game tournament, and Mitsuha's General Store had undergone some slight changes. First, Mitsuha had entrusted her best-selling items to Petz's shop, then lined her own shelves with the less popular goods.

Huh? It's usually the other way around? Sure, but my place would be way too busy if I held on to the popular stuff! Besides, since I'll be open so rarely, it'd be a huge inconvenience for people who want to buy my offerings of daily necessities. So I'm only gonna carry items that aren't particularly popular but have a high profit margin, items that need to be explained to customers, that kind of thing.

Mitsuha also decided to promote the folding bike trailer from a special order-only item to the status of regular stock. She did actually consider closing the store permanently, but couldn't bring herself to do it—she'd grown too attached. And, profit aside, she also got a kick out of watching Japanese products help people in this world. As soon as one of her items caught on, she would just transfer it to Petz's store.

And thus was born Mitsuha's General Store Mark II, which would open only rarely and carry nothing but expensive, unpopular items.

Okay, I'll say what we're all thinking... WHAT KIND OF A STORE IS THAT?!

That wasn't the only change Mitsuha made to her store (or the Yamano clan capital residence, as it was now known): she also upgraded the security system

by adding infrared sensors and wires that, when tripped, would automatically cause a transmitter to send a signal to Yamano County and set off an alarm. Mitsuha's domain was small enough that she would be able to hear it from anywhere within her own borders, and just to be doubly sure, her butler Anton would contact her via walkie-talkie. She would then pop over to the emergency arsenal she was renting at Wolf Fang's base and arrive at her store fully armed.

Mitsuha decided against automatically-fired arrows and the like, out of fear they would hit someone who meant no harm. The decision of whether or not to attack was one she needed to make personally.

When Sabine was informed of these new defensive measures, she responded with disbelief. "Mitsuha, just who do you think is going to attack your store?!"

Sh-Shut up!

Mitsuha also built a gun turret on the roof. It was an elevated mobile pedestal where she could install a heavy machine gun, giving her a full 360-degree command of the surrounding streets. The machine gun wouldn't be on the pedestal at all times, of course; she would just jump there with it in case of emergency.

"...Are you at *war* with someone, Mitsuha...?" Sabine asked, aghast.

Shut up, I said! I'm just a cautious person! Well, most of my classmates probably wouldn't buy that for a second... But my childhood friend Micchan would know what I'm talking about! I think...



What if my capital residence gets besieged by bandits? What if I can't jump away for some reason? What if I need to protect the people of this city? I wouldn't be able to relax without these safety measures in place.

Anyway, the remodeling on my capital residence is done, and I'm finally finished giving out the rewards from the board game tournament. It's about time to say, "Our true battle is just beginning!"

Oh, don't worry. This isn't about to get cut off like some anime that got canceled just as the story was heating up. I swear.

Mitsuha had taken care of all her business in the capital for the time being. Now that lightning corn shipments were arriving from Yamano County, the orphanage could continue their operation alongside mass market sales, no problem. Others had begun to start their own popcorn endeavors, too: merchants who learned they could make their own lightning corn if they used the kernels grown in Yamano County, stall owners who had seen the orphans' success firsthand, even some juvenile delinquents who thought they could butt into the market. All Mitsuha could do was watch and see how it all played out...

Just when Mitsuha was about ready to return to her domain, she received a message from Sabine.

"Father wants to see you."

Guess I can't ignore a summons from the king...

"You summoned me, Your Majesty?" Mitsuha said.

"Indeed, thank you for coming. I wanted to discuss our plan to warn the

neighboring countries of the threat of possible invasion,” the king began.

Oh yeah, we did talk about that, didn't we. I kinda forgot...

“I intend to send envoys abroad soon—not yet to negotiate, but to inform the various countries of the situation and stress the need for unity. We don't know where the enemy will arrive next, and if we allow them ashore, the whole continent will be overrun. I want to spread word in preparation for a conference with the aim of forming an alliance for mutual defense.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Mitsuha replied. *He's really thought this through. Way to go, Your Majesty!*

“And, if the participating countries are to take part in the joint development of new ships and powerful new weapons, they'll have no choice but to join the alliance...”

Whoa, nefarious!

“Heh heh heh, you're such a scoundrel, Your Majesty...”

“Nonsense. I've got nothing on you, Mitsuha...”

The king had grown fond of some strange turns of phrase ever since Sabine started relating the plots of her favorite *Mito Komon* episodes to him, and he now used them at every opportunity. Mitsuha and Sabine were constantly having to create situations for him to get it out of his system. They didn't want him freaking anyone else out with his weird catchphrases.

Who knows what kind of trouble that might cause?! Damn it, Sabine, why'd you have to go and pollute his mind like that?!

“We will select the envoys, aides, and guards from among the staff of the royal palace, of course,” the king said. “Meanwhile, I have another job in mind for you, Mitsuha, er, Viscountess Yamano.”

“Is it to demonstrate the strength of our weapons and display my authority as the Lightning Archpriestess?” Mitsuha asked.

“It is indeed.”

He went out of his way to correct himself and call me Viscountess Yamano instead of Mitsuha. That can only mean one thing: he’s giving me this task not as Sabine’s friend, but as his vassal. It’s not an order I can refuse.

“I humbly accept thy command, Your Majesty.”

After departing the king’s presence, Mitsuha returned to her domain. She needed to turn her mind to county affairs, but first she threw herself down on the bed to have a good think.

Item one: her diplomatic mission. It was already a done deal that she was going—now the only question was how to travel. World-jumping wasn’t an option because she had never been to these countries before. Once she had, she would be able to jump there whenever she liked, but initially she would have to travel there by normal means.

Come to think of it, this could be pretty useful down the line.

The first thing Mitsuha needed to do was choose her mode of transportation.

I want no part of the rattly, butt-murdering carriages of this world, and I don’t wanna get stuck talking to any dirty old men on the way, either! I like my older men refined, thank you very much. I mean it!

I could take a royal carriage, but I wouldn’t be able to fit much luggage, and I’d always have eyes on me, too. It’d make it hard to act freely.

Should I use my personal carriage, then? I’d avoid the butt pain that way, at

least. But it's small, with limited carrying capacity, and I doubt Silver could handle a journey that long all on his own. It may be a high-quality Earth-made carriage, but it could still break down after traveling on unpaved roads for a long time, and then I'd be screwed. I'd have to jump back to Earth to get it repaired, and because it was custom-made, acquiring the necessary parts would take a while. Plus, the carriage would be waaaay too slow. Talk about a waste of time. There's gotta be a faster, comfier, more convenient way...

I can just ask the king for money, so expense shouldn't be an issue. Think... Think...

Ding ding ding!

After mulling it over for a while, an idea suddenly popped into Mitsuha's head. She would have to do a bit of checking, but it just might work. It would take a lot of money and time to prepare, but she hoped the king would agree to lend her some gold. In which case, time was the bigger issue.

I'd better get to work! As soon as I take care of matters in my domain and confirm a few things, I'll begin preparations. Assuming everything's good to go, that is.

All right, time to head to my office and hear Anton's report on what's been happening in my absence...

"County meeting time!" Mitsuha announced. The people gathered in the dining room looked at her, their faces grave.

The group was comprised of everyone who served Mitsuha directly, including those who worked at her Yamano County residence, the army officers, and her

technological advisor Randy.

Not one for formality, Mitsuha started off by joking around a bit to lighten the mood, but everyone present understood the importance of this meeting. They knew it would influence the future of Yamano County, and that what was said—or wasn't said—would directly impact the lives of its citizenry. The words of the commoners would affect the course of county government—and the honor and trepidation stemming from that knowledge was giving everyone in the room sweaty palms. Mitsuha was no exception, but she didn't let it show in her face.

“Okay, let's hear your reports.”

They had held enough of these meetings to have this part down to a science—everyone knew the order in which the reports should be given and what kind of information should be included. First up was the most important topic, defense and security. Major Willem, the commander of the county army, gave the report.

“Training is proceeding as planned. The recent naval invasion has lit a fire under the troops. There are some who hope to be promoted to permanent status, and quite a few who participate in training even when it's not their time to serve. Morale is high.”

The four other officers—Sven and his group of former mercenaries—nodded. The biggest issue for the domain's army was the development of new guns, but that was highly confidential, and there was no sense in bringing it up here. Mitsuha would deal with that later.

“Next up, the economy!”

“Yes, my lady,” Miriam responded. She was in charge of financial affairs.

“Agricultural production is largely unchanged from previous years, but that’s to be expected since the results of our various reforms won’t be seen until the next harvest. The new projects are going well, and there are no complaints from the farmers.

“Forestry is proceeding as normal. Demand for board games in the capital has calmed down significantly, but we have yet to come close to meeting demand in other regions, so sales are unlikely to drop any time soon. However...”

“Knockoffs?” Mitsuha asked.

“Yes. Some have already started to appear on the market.”

Mitsuha wasn’t all that surprised; she’d had a feeling that was coming.

“Don’t worry about the imitators. I’ll spread the notion among the nobility that all board games not made in Yamano County are fakes, that they’re cheap products made for the poor and owning one would be an embarrassment. Miriam, have some people seed a rumor among the commoners that there might be another tournament, and that people won’t be able to participate with counterfeit boards. The ‘might’ is key, though. Be absolutely sure not to say there ‘will’ be another one.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” Miriam stammered.

Everyone else looked a little put off; they knew she had no intention of holding another tournament.

“Also, I want you to put it in people’s heads that imitating Yamano County’s special products might not be such a good idea. Make sure everyone knows that, even though she was named a viscountess, the Lightning Archpriestess chose a small baron’s territory out of the goodness of her heart, and that she develops and sells her products with the goal of improving her people’s lives.

Anyone who dares to produce, sell, or buy imitations should fear divine punishment.”

None of that was a lie... Not really, anyway.

But now everyone was practically shrinking away from her.

Next they heard the report from the fishing village, which was prospering more than ever. They got the latest updates on the new fishing boats that were being built and the state of the captured ships moored at the floating pier, as well as news of their former crews. This brought the meeting to a close.

After most of the participants had left, Mitsuha transitioned to a meeting with only the key authorities in Yamano County. They discussed the development of the new guns, the activity of neighboring domains, industrial projects that hadn't been revealed to the public yet, and more.

Afterward, Mitsuha made an announcement. “In a little while, I'll be leaving for a long journey on the king's orders. I could be gone a few months, maybe even longer. I want you to prepare to manage the county and continue with research and development in my absence.”

The room fell silent. Mitsuha had hinted at such an eventuality, so she figured they wouldn't be too surprised, but hearing her officially announce it was another matter. She decided to add something to make them feel better, just in case.

“There's no need to worry! You'll be able to contact me over the radio whenever you need to! If anything happens, I'll come right back!”

News of everything that had happened in the capital had reached Yamano County by this point—albeit in quite an exaggerated state—so they knew about her traversal ability. Mitsuha had given them the story that, while jumping to

her home country would consume a great deal of life force, making the occasional round trip over smaller distances wouldn't take much of a physical toll on her at all. Her freedom would've been hampered if she hadn't explained it this way, and everyone saw the Lightning Archpriestess as a living legend anyway, so it would be a waste not to use her ability.

At this, the drawn faces of everyone present finally relaxed. Colette's response bothered her, though. Mitsuha would've expected the girl to be more upset than anyone at the announcement of her trip, but she barely reacted at all. *What is she scheming...?*

"Let me know as soon as your plans are set," Colette said. "I have to tell Mom and Dad, and I need time to pack."

Oh, I see. She's determined to come with me... Eh, I guess that's fine. She'd be lonely here without me, and going on a journey abroad would be a good learning opportunity for someone I intend to make the brains behind my domain someday. It's actually a pretty good idea. Anyway, I'd miss her.

All right, we'll go together!

The next day, Mitsuha pretended to go out for an inspection of her domain, but instead jumped back to the capital. *If I never specify where I'm going to inspect, no one will care if they don't see me. They'll just think I'm somewhere else in the county.*

She headed straight for what you might call stagecoach HQ, or, a kind of coach dispatch center. Many coachmen who had driven for merchant caravans or worked for nobles and diplomats in their youth ended up there after their retirement. They had plenty of experience traveling abroad before they settled

down, which was precisely what Mitsuha was looking for.

Time for some questions.

“Hmm, so the roads are pretty wide?” Mitsuha asked.

“Aye. It’d be troublesome if pedestrians had to get to the side of the road every time a big ol’ six-or eight-horse carriage passed by. An’ the roads hafta be wide enough for carriages to pass each other, anyway. Some have waiting areas off to the side for that, but ’s not necessary on the main highways. Armies use the roads, too, sometimes...”

Hmm, that makes sense... The roads in my county aren’t very big, except for the one I made, but highways connecting countries would have to be pretty broad... This might actually work.

“Um, what’s the traffic like at night?” Mitsuha asked.

After gathering the requisite information, Mitsuha decided her plan was a go. Now all that remained was to look through some documents and work out the details.

She spent the next day taking care of her business in Japan and touring car dealerships—specifically ones that specialized in recreational vehicles. Each dealership differed when it came to the types of vehicles they stocked and the quality of their employees, so she narrowed it down to a few dealerships beforehand using the internet.

That’s right—my secret weapon for our foreign expedition is an RV!

RVs are fast, provide shelter from the rain, have plenty of loading capacity,

are comfortable to live in... They would provide protection from arrows as well, and even an assailant with a sword would have a hard time killing the driver right off the bat, which meant Mitsuha could jump to safety if need be. Safe, fast, comfy—it was the perfect mode of transport.

They wouldn't sleep in the RV every night, of course. Mitsuha planned to find lodging at an inn whenever they reached a village or town. The trip would be a lot less fun otherwise. Before entering a town she would jump the RV back home, then walk the rest of the way. She doubted travelers paid much attention to the people they passed on the road, so there probably wouldn't be any trouble... Hopefully.

If I were traveling alone, I'd be able to use the subcompact I have now and jump home whenever I needed to sleep or use the bathroom, but that wouldn't be any fun. It wouldn't feel like a trip at all! Plus, if Colette is coming, I want a proper home base. No, "home base" isn't quite right; I guess it'll be more of a mothership, like White Base or Zelana.

They may look big, but anyone can drive an RV with a regular license as long as the gross vehicle weight is under 3.5 tons and the riding capacity is ten or fewer. If it was only going to be two or three petite girls in the vehicle, Mitsuha didn't need something big enough for a whole family or anything. A larger RV might be too big and heavy for the roads, anyway.

Mitsuha would have felt most comfortable buying Japanese, but she was leaning American for one particular reason: the toilet. RV toilets can be roughly divided into three categories: portable, cassette, and marine. *There're also incinerator toilets and composting toilets, but I'll leave those out of this info dump.*

In portable toilets, the bowl and waste tank are combined into one (portable)

unit. The big drawback is that the tank's capacity is fairly low, but on the plus side, you can put it away when it isn't needed. Cassette toilets have a higher capacity, but as with portable toilets, you still need to throw away the waste yourself, which is obviously an unpleasant visual and olfactory experience. Marine toilets, on the other hand, are installed directly into the vehicle, and have an even larger capacity. The best part about them is that you dispose of waste by pumping it directly to a dump station through a hose, sparing you the sight. Easy-peasy.

Marine toilets are common in American RVs but rare in their Japanese counterparts, primarily due to the lack of dump stations in Japan. Cassette and portable toilets are far and away the most common in Japan, and pretty much the only way to get an RV with a marine toilet is to import it from America. None of this presented a problem for Mitsuha, however—all she had to do was jump to a dump station along with the waste. She would choose a dump station at an unpopular campsite somewhere in rural America, and jump the waste straight into the tank in the middle of the night.

I'd better practice this with water beforehand to avoid an unspeakable tragedy...

Mitsuha also wanted the water tank to be large and built in, rather than being cassette style, since the toilet and shower were going to consume a lot of water. She would use her world-jumping ability to refill the tank as well, of course. It would be annoying having to constantly refill a twenty-liter plastic tank by hand, as would jumping home to fill it with a hose, which would require sanitizing the hose and so on.

So an American RV suited Mitsuha better, in addition to giving her more options. Japan was better at making compact vehicles, but it was undeniable

that America was still slightly superior when it came to RVs, given the country's longer history with them.

The only real issue is that it's gonna take a while to get my RV because of all the customizations I want to make: adjustments to the seat, the accelerator, the brake pedal... I'm too damn short to see the road or reach the pedals otherwise! It sucks!

Mitsuha didn't need any weapons for the RV. It would be problematic if they were stolen, and she could get arrested for unlawful possession when she jumped back to Japan to refuel. *I'm a good, law-abiding citizen, I'll have you know!* Removing important parts to guard against theft wouldn't work either, because it would take too long to put them back together when she needed them. Considering that, the safest and fastest thing to do would be to jump to the captain's place and grab the weapons she kept stored there.

I thought about putting a turret on the roof, but decided against it. I can always just jump away if we get surrounded by a large group of enemies. If I really have no choice but to counterattack—to protect someone, for instance—then I can just jump to my arsenal. I don't have a magical bag of holding or anything, but you could consider the entire Earth my item storage. Huh, I never thought about it that way!

So Mitsuha visited a number of dealerships and listened to their sales pitches. She wasn't about to sign right away—she simply listened, then narrowed it down to three candidates to revisit at a later date. The biggest problem was that at first, no one would take her seriously. They all thought she was just a kid, window shopping on a lark.

I thought that might happen, so I brought my license and a bank statement just in case. When they saw the latter, their attitudes did a total one-eighty.

Why didn't I bring my passbook, you ask? That would've been dumb and unnecessary. Purse snatchers will target a small woman like me if I show something like that in public... Although they normally just think I'm a kid and leave me alone, unless I give them reason to think otherwise. Most thieves won't risk getting arrested over a kid's allowance... I think.

Once things are settled with the RV, I'm gonna head back to Japan to do some cleaning and take care of my emails. Then I'll swing by Wolf Fang's base and see the captain. It's been a while.

"I'm heeere!" Mitsuha announced cheerfully.

"I can see that..." the captain replied.

Their usual exchange out of the way, Mitsuha dove right into the purpose behind her visit.

"Got any more money for me?"

"Transferred it to your account."

Sweet.

It was only thanks to this source of income that Mitsuha was comfortable buying an expensive RV; without it she would've taken her subcompact instead. That said, she still used the inheritance from her parents to pay for the vehicle. The money she made through Wolf Fang was all going straight to her Swiss bank account. Otherwise, the large transfers of money from overseas would've caught the tax office's attention.

It might be about time to submit a form to the tax office so I can make it look like I'm dealing with overseas clients... Registration and taxes'll be a pain if I buy the RV abroad, and if I don't register it in Japan I won't be able to get a license

plate, which would mean I couldn't jump it back there ever. My Japanese bank account is only going down, while I've got money positively flooding into both my Swiss account and the one I opened in this country.

"How's business?" Mitsuha asked.

"Goin' just fine," the captain replied. "Our current income is comin' mostly from sellin' the dragon parts and our share of the profits stemmin' from the research. It'll probably be a few years before that starts payin' off in earnest, though. I figure the herbs you brought will start fillin' our pockets first."

Hmm, well, that's still better than I expected.

At present, Mitsuha had enough Japanese yen to support herself for about ten years. Actually, it could be longer—her utilities and food costs were going to be minimal since she spent most of her time living in the other world, and she'd already paid off the mortgage on her house. She could easily afford an expensive RV without fear of running out of money. And if she ever did run low, she could procure gems or jewelry in the other world and sell them as mementos of her mother. That would only work so many times, though.

All right, next on the list is figuring out how to submit that report to the tax office and clearing space in my yard for the RV. Sounds like a real blast...

Three months after ordering the RV, its delivery date was finally approaching. Mitsuha had spent that entire time devoting herself to preparing for the trip.

"Take a solid stance and steady the lower half of your body! That's it... Now relax, take careful aim, and..."



Bang!

Nice. Colette's shooting posture has gotten a lot better.

Mitsuha had been taking Colette to target practice so she could give her a handgun for self-defense on the journey. There was no telling what would happen while they were on the road, and Mitsuha was unlikely to be by her side the entire time, so she wanted Colette to be able to protect herself. She would surely need those skills down the line, anyway. She was a future chief vassal of Yamano County, and there was no doubt she was going to be a babe when she grew up.

"You've got way more of a knack for this than the li'l lady," the captain called from behind.

Yeah, I'm not dumb enough to try and teach an amateur how to use a gun when I'm still just a beginner myself.

The mercenaries were taking turns watching Colette and giving advice, which Mitsuha duly translated. They would leap up and grab her shooting arm as soon as it looked like she was going to do something dangerous.

"Are all women warriors where you're from, li'l lady?" the captain asked.

Of course not! You saw what the place was like during the battle to defend the capital, didn't you?!

"Well, Colette can actually throw things forward, so she could probably even use hand grenades. Stronger'n you, too..."

H-Hey, why does it have to be a competition?! Anyway, Colette's showing real growth in her b—er, her weapons skill.

"Hope you caught the 'actually' in that sentence, li'l lady. Still no grenades for

you.”

Shut up, already!

Chapter 32

Setting Off

The day of departure had finally arrived.

That was fast, you say? I mean, I had so much to do every day that it really did feel like those three months passed in a flash. I had to visit the countries on Earth I'd entrusted with samples from the other world, meet with bigwigs from the major powers... Oh, I'm being careful never to meet with representatives from just one country. I always see people from multiple countries at a time, and have mercenaries there to act as guards. Otherwise the representatives would make ridiculous demands, try to threaten me, or try to coerce me into all kinds of things. And what a headache that would be! I could jump away if I really needed to, of course, but it's always better to avoid conflict in the first place.

A delegation had been formed for the journey, its purpose being to meet with other countries as a first step toward forming a joint defense treaty for the protection of the continent from overseas invaders. The leader of the delegation was some count who had been given full authority by the king. He had accepted the king's overtures without reservation because his son was already fully grown and prepared to succeed him in the event he didn't survive the trip.

It was certainly true that the members of the delegation were putting themselves in danger. They could run into bandits at any point, and there was no denying the possibility that a country with whom they didn't have particularly close relations might feel threatened by the alliance and attack them, whether openly or disguised as a bandit raid.

A man about twenty years of age was chosen as the count's advisor. He was the eldest son of a marquis, and the king professed him to be a sharp and agreeable feminist, but the way the fresh-faced young man stared at her gave Mitsuha the creeps.

A member of the royal family was also coming, in order to give the delegation some authority and convey that the kingdom was serious.

"Yay! I'm so glad we're going on a trip together!"

It was Sabine.

Wait. Hold the phone. No one told me about thiiis!

"Why is Sabine here?!" Mitsuha shrieked.

"...She beat me at shogi," came the king's reply.

"Natch..."

The king looked like he was about to cry, and Mitsuha couldn't bring herself to say anything more. Sabine was grinning wickedly.

They weren't the only members of the delegation, of course—a host of civil servants, secretaries, maids, ladies-in-waiting, and guards were coming along as well. It was going to be a long journey, after all.

Following initial introductions, the delegation moved to the main hall where they received a briefing from the king and were given a farewell party. This was going to be a long journey from which they might literally never return. The relatives, friends, and coworkers of the members of the delegation embraced them and wept as they said what could be their final goodbyes. There was no sense of tragedy or grim resolve among the delegation themselves, however—most practically shone at the honor of having been chosen for this important mission, thinking of the grand welcome they would receive upon

their return.

Everyone then proceeded to the courtyard where the members of the delegation boarded their carriages as everyone waved goodbye. Mitsuha climbed into the most splendid carriage, positioned in the center of the procession, which she would naturally be sharing with the delegation leader, his advisor, and Sabine. There was also the coachman and two maids. These seven would be spending a great deal of time together on this long journey.

Well, that's what the other six think, at any rate.

Spurred on by the hopes of the various concerned parties, the string of carriages departed.

It had been a few hours since the procession left the capital. The delegation's leader, Count Audist von Kolbmane, and his advisor, Clarge Kardebolt, son of Marquis Kardebolt, had been keeping quiet out of deference to Sabine, who was frolicking in Mitsuha's lap...but eventually Clarge's curiosity got the better of him.

"S-So, Archpriestess..."

"Please, call me Mitsuha. I would feel uncomfortable having a marquis's son treat me so formally. I'm just a newly-minted viscountess, after all."

"O-Oh, are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Clarge appeared overjoyed at being given permission to speak to a woman without the usual formalities. "Anyway, it's about the thing you had installed in here," he continued, pointing at a strange box set in the corner of the carriage. It sat on a cushion to protect it as much as possible from the carriage's

vibrations, and a variety of what appeared to be strings emanated from within it.

“That’s a radio transceiver. It’s a magic box that will allow us to speak with the king even from a great distance,” Mitsuha explained.

“What?!” Count Kolbmane and Clarge cried in disbelief. The maids’ eyes went wide with surprise, too, but they kept quiet. No one who lacked such self-restraint would ever have been chosen to serve a princess or the leader of such an important delegation. Sabine wasn’t surprised in the least, obviously.

“I-I don’t...” Clarge was speechless.

“This renders the authority His Majesty vested in me all but meaningless...” Count Kolbmane muttered, looking despondent. The prestigious role he had been entrusted with suddenly felt much less important.

“Oh, this is a perfect time to teach you how to use it,” Mitsuha said. “It’s a different model from the one in your room, Sabine, so you should listen, too.”

Clarge and Count Kolbmane lacked the status to know about the radio in Sabine’s room, so this was the first time they had heard of any of this. Mitsuha taught them the bare minimum they would need for communication, and warned them and Sabine not to touch any of the other dials and switches.

There were two radios, one for HF bands and the other for VHF and UHF. Mitsuha had brought a battery as well, of course, hooked up to a solar panel on the carriage’s roof. If they ran out of juice, Mitsuha could jump to her house and grab the spare battery she kept charged there, but the radios would be turned off at all times except for regular daily contact, so that was unlikely to happen. The antenna was a 7-430 MHz broadband mobile model.

All three listened to Mitsuha’s explanation with serious expressions, while the

maids, peeking through from behind, desperately tried to remember everything she said; they would have to use the radios themselves if anything happened to the others. With that in mind, they worked hard to memorize the instructions even though they had received no order to do so. Mitsuha could see why they were chosen for this mission.

Count Kolbmane and Clarge understood the gist of Mitsuha's initial explanation, but after a short break, she began to give them further instruction. This time she went beyond how to simply operate the switches and taught them basic troubleshooting, like what to do if the antenna was detached, the power cable came unplugged, or the frequency dial got turned accidentally. The endless parade of unfamiliar concepts and terminology seemed to overwhelm the men.

Feeling exhausted, Clarge remembered the command that his father—Marquis Kardebolt, a noble with great influence among the royalists—had given him the day he was chosen to join this expedition:

I managed to get you chosen as a member of the diplomatic delegation. And as advisor to the delegation leader, no less, riding in the same carriage as him and the Lightning Archpriestess. You have no idea how many nobles and civil officials fought for the position...

So listen up, Clarge. You cannot waste this opportunity after all the effort I went through to arrange it for you. Make sure you form a friendship with the Archpriestess, and get as much information out of her as you can! About her knowledge, the technology of her homeland, the secret art of traversal she uses to travel there in an instant, anything and everything! And most importantly...

His father's eyes snapped wide.

Woo the Archpriestess! I want her to join our family!

And now the first day of the trip had finally arrived. Clarge had felt positively toward Mitsuha even before he met her. How could he not? She was the savior of their kingdom and princess of a mighty nation with highly advanced technology. She'd had the bravery to jump in front of a marquis from a country not her own in order to protect him from an assassin's arrow. She used her secret arts to defend their kingdom at the cost of her own life force. And, from what he'd heard, she had faced an entire pack of wolves to save a lowly commoner in Bozes County, wiping them out despite sustaining heavy injuries.

Now, upon meeting her in person, he discovered she was bright, spirited, intelligent, charismatic...and cute. He was never going to be satisfied by a marriage proposal from your average stuck-up, entitled noble girl after this. It was difficult for a person to readjust their standards after being exposed to luxury, and that applied to a man's taste in women as well. Yes, offer up a prayer for Clarge, whose baseline expectations for his future wife just skyrocketed to unreachable heights...

Clarge eventually managed to drag his head out of the clouds, but he was interrupted before he could address Mitsuha.

"Sorry, can you please stop the carriage for a few moments?"

"Already? Mitsuha, you should have peed before we left," Sabine chided.

"H-Hey, that's not why I asked! And don't say that in front of other people! You're supposed to say 'powder your nose'! Anyway, that's not why! Seriously!!" Mitsuha turned beet red at Sabine's lack of tact in front of the men.

Count Kolbmane gave the order and one of the maids passed word to the

coachman, who whistled and waved a pennant to signal the procession to stop. Mitsuha jumped down from the carriage, dashed into some trees by the side of the road, and returned less than ten seconds later. After she had resettled herself, the coachman signaled for the procession to continue.

“Guess she really wasn’t ‘powdering her nose’...” Sabine muttered.

It’s almost time, Mitsuha thought, a few minutes after their brief stop.

She had investigated the first road the delegation would take out of the capital beforehand, which allowed her to jump ahead with a certain object in tow. She ended up making three round trips between this world and Earth to grab it and put it in position.

Now the object in question came into view up ahead. The coachmen at the front of the procession had probably noticed it a while ago, but it wasn’t blocking the road, and an attack was unlikely so soon after leaving the capital. They might have found it strange, but they wouldn’t stop unless ordered to do so.

“Please stop!” Mitsuha cried out again just as the lead carriage was about to pass it. Count Kolbmane assented and signaled the halt. They left the carriage and approached the thing, surrounded by mounted guards.

“What in the world is that...?” the count asked Mitsuha.

Totally reasonable question.

“It’s my personal horseless horsecar,” Mitsuha answered.

“Would you still call it a horsecar if it’s not drawn by a horse?” the count asked.

Damn it, I didn't think of that!

"U-Uh, right... It's a car, a car!"

Should've just called it that in the first place...

"Anyway, we're going to go on ahead without you. Use the radio to let me know as soon as any audience is scheduled, and we'll meet you there. Sound good?" Mitsuha asked, grinning widely.

"Of course not, you fool!" Count Kolbmane yelled.

...Shoot, that really pissed him off. The veins on his temples are bulging.

"His Majesty entrusted me with plenipotentiary powers on this mission, which means I am responsible for anything that happens. It falls to me to ensure the safety of everyone involved. What would I do if something happened to Viscountess Yamano, the Lightning Archpriestess herself, after I let her go off on her own?! I say this not out of fear for my life, but out of devotion to our kingdom! I will not lose my house or even my head because of the selfishness of one little girl!"

This is bad. He's too old to get worked up like this, he might have an aneurysm.

"Y-You don't have to worry about that. See, I'm not a member of the delegation!" Mitsuha replied.

"Huh?"

"Huuuh?"

"HUUUUUUUH?!"

Cries of astonishment rose from all and sundry.

"I-It's true! His Majesty only appointed me as an external aide to assist in

negotiations. I'm not a member of the delegation and am therefore not tied to the chain of command. I have it here in writing," Mitsuha elaborated, before handing the count the document she had prepared. As he read it over carefully, his face turned scarlet.

"Wh-Wha... This is definitely His Majesty's handwriting. And that's his signature... But he never breathed a word of this to me!"

"Ah, well, that's because if information leaked ahead of time that we were going to be acting independently, there would've been all kinds of people trying to get at me. Opportunity-seeking nobles, spies from other countries... The best way to prevent that was to make people think I would be with the delegation the whole time."

The truth was that Mitsuha had told the king there would be a chance she wouldn't return safely if she were tied to the chain of command, as her freedom would be greatly limited should the people above her abuse their authority or be captured. The king went pale upon hearing this, then wrote out a document stating that she was not a part of the delegation and granting her discretionary power.

"B-But we're heading the same way. Even if you're acting independently, won't we still be traveling together, more or less? If you end up at some small remove, I'll have to spread out our guards to defend you, putting us in greater danger to no purpose!" Count Kolbmane argued adamantly.

Mitsuha could see why he was reacting this way. He had probably been eager to garner information from her in the course of this long journey, and as delegation leader, he could even have given her orders, provided they weren't too unreasonable. Being the Lightning Archpriestess's superior for an extended period of time would also have given people the impression that he had a

strong connection with her, which could give his family powerful leverage. Now he had learned that not only would he not be her superior, he wouldn't even be traveling with her, and would only see her at the occasional negotiation. That had to be a massive letdown. It made sense he would fight so hard to at least spend the journey together, if nothing else.

Count Kolbmane was a patriot and wouldn't do anything to harm Mitsuha, but it was only natural he would search for opportunities to benefit his family and his citizens when it didn't impact the kingdom as a whole. She couldn't blame him for that. But Mitsuha had her own interests to look out for as well. It was her duty to work for the benefit of her domain, same as the count. Acting as a part of the delegation would greatly hamper her freedom, and therefore limit what she could do for her citizens. She was not going to budge.

"I don't need guards. I have the Goddess's protection to keep me safe," Mitsuha said. That was what she called world-jumping and guns and anything else that was beyond the ken of the people of this kingdom. It was all much easier to explain that way. "But you're right that we're going the same way. I don't mind traveling together... If you can keep up."

Count Kolbmane looked mildly relieved. He probably thought he could salvage something from this trip as long as they at least ate and lodged together, even if they were riding in separate vehicles.

I feel kinda bad for giving him false hope.

As Mitsuha was finishing up her discussion with the count, the RV's door opened and Colette stepped out.

"What's taking so long, Mitsuha?! Let's go already!" she whined, clearly in a bad mood.

“Sorry! Give me one second!” Mitsuha called, then turned back to the count. “It looks like my companion is tired of waiting, so we’ll be going now. Oh, please use the radio in the event of an emergency. You’ll be able to reach me any time I’m in my car. Turn it off by moving the ‘power switch’ down whenever you don’t need it. Otherwise you’ll run out of the divine power from the sun, and then you won’t be able to use it.”

That was why Mitsuha had given them a full explanation of how to use the transceiver, which would’ve been unnecessary if she were spending the whole trip in the same carriage.

Mitsuha turned to Sabine. She was staring at the car and Colette with despair in her eyes, looking like she might cry at any moment.

Whoops, sorry Sabine!

“What’re you spacing out for, Princess? You’re gonna get left behind if you don’t hurry up and get your stuff from the carriage.”

It took a moment for the meaning of Mitsuha’s words to sink in, but then Sabine’s face lit up. She rubbed the tears from her eyes and ran toward the carriage. Mitsuha’s luggage was already in the RV. The small bags she’d brought along in the carriage were just there to keep up appearances; they were stuffed full of things she didn’t need and wouldn’t mind losing.

“Wha...” Count Kolbmane stiffened with surprise once more.

His reaction was, again, perfectly understandable. It must have been a shock to lose the Lightning Archpriestess AND Princess Sabine in a matter of minutes. But Sabine had never been under his command in the first place—it would have been absurd to make a princess follow the orders of a count. She was not a member of the delegation, but was accompanying them as a show of respect to

the foreign royalty they would be meeting. The count had no authority to keep her from joining Mitsuha.

In other words, he just lost his chance to get close to Sabine, who, despite being the third princess and therefore low in the line of succession, is adored by the entire royal family... Who wouldn't be bummed?

But I've been saying "we're" going to be acting independently all along. Why did he think I was the only one leaving?

Sabine returned quickly with her own bags—though all she'd packed was clothes—and Mitsuha's dummy luggage.

Oh yeah, makes sense she'd get my bags, too. She doesn't know I don't need them. Well, they wouldn't have thrown away my bags if I left them behind, so they'd just have taken up space for no reason. She was right to bring them along.

"Okay, all aboard!" Mitsuha cried.

"Aye-aye, ma'am!" Sabine responded, repeating an English phrase she'd heard in a naval movie they had watched on DVD, and giving a playful salute.

Members of the Japan Self-Defense Forces don't salute when they're bareheaded, but it's common overseas, so that's what she learned...

Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette piled into the front seat of the RV before Count Kolbmane could return to his senses and object. It was a huge vehicle and they were all petite girls, so there was more than enough space for them to sit together.

Unlike Colette, whom Mitsuha had already told all about the RV, Sabine was stunned. She was incredibly adaptive, though, and while she was initially

thrown off by the steering wheel and all the levers and gauges, she had seen innumerable cars and trucks in Mitsuha's DVDs, so she adjusted quickly to the situation.

A little too quickly, if you ask me...

Introducing her to Colette could wait. First...

"Buckle up, everybody! The Mitsuha Express is taking off!" Mitsuha announced. It's not as if she burned rubber or anything, though; basically she just put the RV in drive and let it drift slowly forward.

When he saw the RV start to move, Count Kolbmane ran back to his carriage with a cry. They could clearly hear his angry shouts through the open windows.

"Follow them! Get moving, now!"

Catch us if you can... Since there aren't any horses, the count probably thinks the car is being powered from the inside by smaller animals like wolves, deer, or boars, and that their carriages will be able to keep up easily. Sorry about this...

Mitsuha stepped on the gas right when the delegation's carriages began to move behind them.

Zoom!

Mitsuha couldn't see the faces of Count Kolbmane and the others, but she could easily imagine them.

Adios, amigos! We'll be waitin' for ya in the capital of the next kingdom!

Count Kolbmane, his advisor Clarge Kardebolt, and the rest of the members of the delegation watched in blank amazement as Mitsuha left them in the dust in seconds flat. They wore exactly the expressions Mitsuha was picturing.

It took Clarge a moment to process what had happened. Mitsuha was gone, and so was Princess Sabine, who held such influence over her. He might see Mitsuha for a few days at a time in the course of diplomatic meetings, but they would obviously be staying in different rooms at the inn, and even if they ate together, he would be unlikely to get much out of Mitsuha or the princess with everyone else around.

If he didn't figure something out before they returned home, he would have to face his father's disappointment and wrath. Clarge cradled his head in his hands at the terrifying prospect.

The look in Sabine's eyes is really scaring me...

Mitsuha had just finished introducing Sabine and Colette to each other.

This is Sabine, the third princess. This is Colette, a candidate to become one of my vassals. We live together at my county residence.

When Mitsuha introduced them that way, Colette stiffened and Sabine glared at the other girl as if she were a mortal enemy.

Colette's reaction was understandable. She was common to the bone, as common as a commoner could get. Even the lowest-ranking noble lived in a different world than her, somewhere above the clouds. Incurring the displeasure of a noble or a royal was a good way to get your head separated from your shoulders for life. *For life? More like for death! That'd kill you on the spot!!*

Colette's village may not have had as much reason to fear such things—it was located in Bozes County, and the Bozeses weren't like that—but no matter how tolerant their lord might be, her parents had educated her about the dangers of

offending nobles in general. It would be colossally stupid to expect other nobles to be as kind as the Bozeses.

What about me, you ask? I'm different. I wasn't born to the nobility—I'm just a friend of hers who happened to attain the rank of viscountess. In Colette's mind, I'm still the same Mitsuha she formed a bond with when we risked our lives to save each other. I just managed to get ahead in the world a little is all. That's how she can be afraid of barons and knights who rank lower than me, but then still treat me like a normal friend.

Which probably isn't ideal for a viscountess and a potential vassal, now that I think about it. I'd hate for her to start speaking to me formally, though. I'd seriously cry if she started calling me "Lady Mitsuha" or "Viscountess Yamano" or whatever.

The problem here was Sabine, though Mitsuha also understood why she was upset. Colette got to ride in the RV before her, lived in Mitsuha's residence, and spoke to Mitsuha on equal terms. Sabine had initially wanted to call her "Mistress Mitsuha" out of respect, and likely took it as a sign of how close they were when Mitsuha didn't allow that. Now she was meeting a common girl two years younger than herself who threw around "Mitsuha" like it was going out of style. There was no way she wasn't going to be jealous.

This trip was going to be really awkward if Mitsuha couldn't get them to break the ice and become friends.

Oh crap. What'll Sabine do when she finds out I gave Colette a divine weapon? Gaaaaaah! There's gonna be trouble if I don't get ahead of that one... Oh. Oh no. Oh shit! I have a way worse problem than that! Colette knows a secret about me that Sabine doesn't. Something over which Sabine has shed endless tears of worry. Something that's going to be impossible to keep her from discovering on

this trip: the fact that using traversal doesn't harm me at all. I've been keeping it from Sabine, but Colette has known for ages now! Sabine might actually kill me!

Mitsuha's claim that each use of her traversal skill sacrificed some of her life force was a total fabrication—a fabrication that had caused Sabine a great deal of grief. And the other person in the RV knew the truth.

...This is a catastrophe. Sabine's gonna go ballistic! Wh-Wh-What do I do-o-o?!

Guess I have no choice but to tell her the truth. I might have to jump at any moment to avoid a carriage coming the other way. Nothing for it...

Knowing this wasn't a conversation to be had while she was driving, Mitsuha decided to pull off at a turnout. They were already half a day ahead of the delegation, so there was no need to worry about them catching up.

"Huh? We're already taking a break?" Sabine asked dubiously after Mitsuha parked the car. They had departed less than an hour ago.

Mitsuha girded her loins. "Umm... The fact is, there's something important I have to tell you, Sabine."

And so Mitsuha explained that she could use traversal as many times as she liked without harm to herself, that she had lied about her ability in order to avoid constant demands from the king, nobles, and influential merchants, and that she had bases in this kingdom and "Japan" because she didn't want much to do with her homeland. She maintained some smaller lies mixed into her explanation, but only ones Sabine probably wouldn't care too much about if she found out the truth.

But the part about traversal...

"..."

“U-Um, Sabine?”

“...”

“H-Hey...”

Oh boy. Sabine’s not saying anything... And her face is a total blank... She must know from the fact that I only addressed myself to her, and from how calm Colette is, that Colette already knew all this. She’s probably about to...

“...”

Explode...

Wait, what? Are those tears in Sabine’s eyes? That’s... H-Hey, heyyyyyyyy!

Sabine began to sob silently and pound on Mitsuha’s chest as hard as she could.

Oww! That hurts! I don’t have much defensive padding on my chest... Hey, you there, pipe down!

...I’m sorry, Sabine... I’m really sorry...

Sabine’s assault on Mitsuha’s defenseless chest continued for a full thirty seconds before she finally calmed down.

Listen, thirty seconds feels like forever when someone is beating the crap out of you! Trust me on that!! Anyway, I think I’m through the worst of this crisis. That’s a relief.

“Do you have any idea...” Sabine began.

Huh?

“Do you have any idea how much I worried about you every time you

supposedly used up some of your life force?!”

Uh-oh. This is bad. Her thoughts just couldn't keep up with her feelings until now. I'm about to feel the full force of Sabine's wrath...

It was ten minutes later when Sabine finally calmed down. For real this time.

Again, that might not seem like a very long time, but ten minutes is an eternity when someone's screaming at you!

“I understand why you needed to do that, Mitsuha. It was your best option. But I still can't accept it! You should've told *me*, at least! And...” Sabine trailed off, looking at Colette.

I knew it... Sabine would've had an easier time letting this go if I hadn't told anyone else. But I told a commoner girl, who's younger than her to boot. She probably takes that as a sign that I don't trust her. I can only imagine how humiliating that must be, and how sad she must feel.

Normally Sabine would immediately start talking about what Mitsuha had to give her to make up for this, but she showed no sign of doing so. Getting back in her good graces wasn't going to be so easy this time.

I'm truly sorry, Sabine... Please don't look at Colette like you want to kill her. The poor girl is terrified...

“Um...” Colette turned to Sabine and spoke in a quiet voice. “Viscountess Yamano only shares what she deems necessary with the people she deems necessary to share it with, and only *when* she deems it necessary. It has nothing to do with how she feels about those people.”

Grk!! Colette just called me Viscountess Yamano! Like a stake through the heart!

Sure, they had been acting as lord and potential vassal outside of Mitsuha's official residence, but Colette was a little girl, so no one expected her to behave too formally. She had never treated Mitsuha so distantly before.

Ugh, it feels like Colette hates me now... This is so depressing... Wait, maybe she's just trying to help Sabine feel better by making it sound like I only told her because she's a servant of mine. That's just driving the stake deeper, though...

Sabine looks like she feels kind of guilty, somehow. Maybe she thinks her attitude drove Colette to say that. Well, she'd be right. Colette and I were speaking as equals and friends until now, without regard for status. Sabine's way too smart not to realize that she made Colette speak to me like a servant, and how much that hurt my feelings. She should be able to relate—Sabine and I were princess and commoner when we first met. Hell, there's not much difference between a viscountess and a commoner when they're speaking with a princess... Technically, I should never talk with Sabine as informally as I do, even now. But how would it make her feel if I suddenly started speaking super formally to her? She must realize that Colette and I have a similar relationship.

"Sorry..." Sabine said.

Mitsuha didn't know who she was apologizing to or what for, but she didn't ask. She just gently patted Sabine on the head.

"You gotta be kiddin' me... Again?"

"Yep..."

"Why're you always bringing little girls with you?! That all you got in your

army over there?!”

“H-Hey, that’s rude! I just happen to like little g–nope, never mind.”

An awkward silence fell between them.

Mitsuha had hurriedly jumped to Wolf Fang’s base before Sabine had a chance to find out about Colette’s divine weapon and get angry about *that*. She had to give the princess a gun for self-protection, too; that was the next priority.

The captain launched straight into his lesson for Sabine, with Mitsuha as interpreter. More than a few of the other mercenaries offered to teach her instead, but the captain chased them all away with a frightening look on his face.

“You’d better not try anything. Sabine’s a princess, you know,” Mitsuha warned.

“Shut up! She’s a child, for God’s sake! ...Wait, did you say, ‘princess’?”

Huh? What happened? The captain suddenly looks really uncomfortable...

“What’s wrong?”

“Why’d you have to say that?! Guys like me, we got a soft spot for princesses and noble ladies!”

Huh?

“Uh, I’m a noble lady myself...”

“Huh? Oh yeah, that’s right... Well, you’re an exception.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

It turned out to be a quick lesson.

“How’d you master that so fast?!” Mitsuha cried.

“Y-You’re even better than me...” Colette muttered.

Shockingly quick. At the end, Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette had a target shooting competition. Sabine got first, Colette second, and Mitsuha did so poorly she may as well have come in fifth.

How can I be so much worse than them?!

Mitsuha’s shoulders drooped dejectedly.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you...and Colette,” Sabine said after she saw how useless Mitsuha was with a gun.

To prevent things from getting any worse, Mitsuha had taken Sabine to Wolf Fang’s base right after sharing her traversal secret, so the princess was still feeling a little raw. She seemed to realize that neither Mitsuha nor Colette had done anything wrong, however, and probably just needed some time to process it all. After all, she had thought Mitsuha was shortening her life span every time she jumped, which must have been a terrible psychic burden.

Shoot, that’s totally my fault! I had my reasons, but still...

The fact that Sabine had included Colette in her offer of protection also seemed to be a sign that her anger was subsiding.

At least one person had an objection, however. “You do not have to protect me, Your Highness,” Colette declared. “I will be a shield to defend you and Viscountess Yamano from harm!”

Yeah, that’s about what I expected.

“...Sabine,” Sabine muttered.

“Huh?”

“Please call me Sabine,” the princess said, a little louder.

What the hell?! Colette’s a commoner, with a capital C! There’s no way she’ll feel comfortable calling a princess by her first name! Sabine’s just bullying her at this point!

“Cool! Sabine it is!” Colette said.

Whaaaaaa?! Mitsuha was flabbergasted. You’re a bigger fish than I thought, Colette, you girl genius...

The two of them struck up a conversation while Mitsuha talked business with the captain. There didn’t seem to be any bad vibes, and Mitsuha felt a certain amount of relief when she saw them smiling at each other.

Shortly afterward, still mired in despair at being far and away the worst shot among the three of them, Mitsuha grabbed both girls and jumped back to the other world.

Oh, I jumped the entire RV to the mercenary base and back, naturally. The men asked me where I bought it and where I had learned to drive, but I just told them that with enough money, you could do anything, and that seemed to satisfy them. That’s just the world we live in.

Mitsuha decided to camp out that evening so she could further explain the RV to Sabine and Colette. *Do you even call sleeping in an RV “camping out”? Oh well, whatever.*

“This is the refrigerator. There’s a toilet and a shower, too, like at my county and capital residences, but our water supply is limited to what we have in the tank, so don’t waste any. The drainage also goes into a tank under the car that

we have to empty later. This thing connected to the TV is Sabine's beloved DVD player. And this..."

Colette and Sabine had a decent amount of experience using various appliances at Mitsuha's residences, so the tour went smoothly. Mitsuha had also already shown Colette around the RV before the trip, and Sabine was a fast learner. How would they react to the next item, though?

"This is the greatest technological achievement from 'Japan,' homeland of anime. It's called a video game console."

"Game console?" Sabine and Colette repeated.

Mitsuha had directed their attention to the MES she had on a shelf. It wasn't the original model, though, but the redesigned MES-101 that was released about a decade later. She knew they would have time to kill on the long trip, so she'd brought a game console from her parents' collection. They'd had the original MES as well, but that could only connect to a TV via an RF switch, which modern TVs weren't built to accommodate. An MES couldn't connect directly to an exclusively digital TV anyway, because it outputs analog video signals. That was why she chose the MES-101.

The newest game consoles would have been over the girls' heads, and if they started with modern games, they'd have a hard time going back to the older ones. So Mitsuha wanted to start with the older games and work up to the newer ones. She thought Wyvern Quest and other games from that era would be perfect for beginners. They would break the controllers if she gave them Super Olympics, though, so she skipped that one.

Mitsuha would be overjoyed if playing video games helped them stave off the boredom and become friends.

If only Mitsuha had known the repercussions of her actions. The next day Sabine and Colette got so immersed in the game they were playing that they spent the entire time in the back of the RV, and never even thought to come up front and keep Mitsuha company while she drove.

Getting obsessed with the game wasn't the only thing that happened—they were also suddenly acting like the very best of friends. Mitsuha couldn't hear a word of their conversations, but they were like two commoner girls who had known each other their whole lives.

...What's going on here?

To be fair, Colette has friends her age to play with at my county residence, but I doubt Sabine has ever had the same, or ever really will... Sheesh, I'd better not say that out loud.

Well, guess we'll just see how this plays out. Que sera, sera, and all that.

Mitsuha heard them shouting in the back of the RV:

"Why would you go into a cave without torches?!"

"You can't open that without a key!"

"You don't have enough medicinal herbs!"

She kept on driving all alone, feeling left out.

Mitsuha was teaching both Sabine and Colette how to read and write Japanese—it was important for the latter's future as her vassal—so they could read the simplified text of the old video game just fine.

...How did we end up here?!

As Mitsuha was driving along all by her lonesome, a carriage came into view up ahead.

Whenever someone came the other way, she either parked the car in a turnout or moved slightly off the road so they could pass. Unlike carriages, the RV could easily get back on the road after leaving it. The coachmen stared at the vehicle in shock as they passed, but that was nothing to worry about. Mitsuha always made sure to put on a hat, sunglasses, and a mask.

Oh, it's not the RV that's freaking them out, but my shady disguise? Whoops.

This time, the carriage ahead of them was traveling in the same direction. Approaching and passing it from behind could scare the coachmen or the horses and cause an accident. She couldn't approach the carriage without warning, and using the horn was out of the question.

That only leaves one option.

Zip!

That was easy.

Mitsuha used consecutive jumps to move well ahead of the carriage. She could jump anywhere she could see, so she jumped to Earth and back to this world with lightning speed, ending up way down the road. The jump probably felt like a slight tremor to Sabine and Colette—if they even noticed. The carriage they passed would've seen at most a glimpse of the RV coming into view behind them before it vanished. The passengers might have been perplexed for a brief moment, but it wouldn't have stuck in their minds for long.

Mitsuha could continue to use this method to warp—or rather, leap—through the landscape at astonishing speed, but she wasn't going to do that. It would be a pain, and it would totally ruin the atmosphere of the trip. Nothing fun or

interesting about skipping the whole thing.

Mitsuha turned around and yelled at the two in the back, still immersed in their game, “Spend some time with me! You’re gonna make me cryyy!!”

Sabine and Colette finally took a break from the game and joined Mitsuha up front after that. *I really will cry if they don’t spend more time with me!*

The girls seemed to have talked a lot while they were playing the game and had become friendly as could be. *Sweet, all according to plan! Just don’t become such good friends that I get left out of the group...*

Sabine wrote down the password on a piece of paper, phew. But there will surely come a day when they taste the pain of writing down the password incorrectly, leaving them unable to continue. Mwahaha!

“It’s almost time for the second bell of the afternoon (3pm), so I’m gonna contact the royal palace,” Mitsuha said, reaching for the HF radio.

The RV powered the wireless radio as long as the engine was running, so she just left it on while they were driving. That way she would know right away if the king or delegation was trying to contact her. If they called while she wasn’t in the car, they would just have to try again later. It was unlikely they’d ever have anything too urgent to tell her, anyway. And if not for the radios, the king wouldn’t be able to contact her *at all* until she returned from the journey, so he would just have to deal.

So while Mitsuha had established a regular contact time, it wasn’t an everyday thing; she told them only to call when they had something to discuss. That meant she didn’t always need to wait by the radio at the scheduled time, but it wasn’t hard to be available. All she had to do was not take a shower or

get out of the car to stretch during the appointed time slot.

This was the first contact since their departure.

“Checkmate King One, Checkmate King One, this is White Rook, over.”

“This is King One. You’re coming through loud and clear!” The king replied immediately. He must have been waiting eagerly by the transceiver. **“Is King Seven doing okay?”**

We only left yesterday! There’s no way she’d get sick or hurt that quickly!

Mitsuha had drilled it into the king to use call signs instead of names while speaking over the radio. She had also changed the frequency she used to contact her county. It was unlikely calls would be intercepted anywhere other than the delegation carriage, but she didn’t want any spies who might be listening in to know who was talking. She had removed the radio from her capital residence and brought it to her home in Japan, so there was no need to worry about that, at least.

Mitsuha had instructed the delegation to turn off their transceiver when they weren’t using it. She was unsure if the small solar panel on the roof would be enough to keep it charged, and it was highly unlikely she or the royal palace would need to contact the delegation while they were traveling. If they absolutely needed to contact Mitsuha but the matter wasn’t that urgent, they could call her at regular intervals or call the royal palace, where the radio would be on at all times and there was always likely to be someone waiting by the transceiver. That person could then call Mitsuha continuously until she picked up.

Mitsuha had made sure to tell them she would do her best to be in the RV and monitoring the radio around the second bell of the afternoon. But if she

ever had something urgent to tell the delegation, she could calculate their probable position based on their travel speed and jump to the nearest town, find out if they'd passed through, triangulate their position, then perform consecutive jumps until she made visual contact. If they weren't in a town, they would be on the highway, and finding such a large procession of carriages would be a cinch. And since the royal palace's radio would be on at all times, the delegation could make it all even easier by giving them occasional status reports.

"King Seven is doing well... A little too well, if you ask me. We parted ways with the main delegation yesterday as planned, and are proceeding independently. Nothing else to report on our end," Mitsuha said.

"Understood. Nothing much here either. Take care of Sa—King Seven for me!"

"Roger that. Until next time."

"Indeed."

Mitsuha ended the call. She was pleased with how well the 7-MHz band traveled this time of day.

Oh, of course I checked with the king beforehand about acting independently from the delegation. I'm not dumb enough to spirit Sabine away without permission from the king.

"So," Mitsuha began, "I'm thinking we stay at an inn toni—"

"NO!" Sabine and Colette cried in unison.

Good lord. They don't want to stay at an inn because they wouldn't be able to play their game...?

Mitsuha could turn on the headlights and keep driving after dark, but there

was no need to rush. The delegation was far behind them, so they could take it slow and enjoy the trip. Also, driving with the headlights would be visible from miles away in the dark. Most bandits would probably stay away from the suspicious lights, but there was at least a small chance they could attract some dangerous people. As such, she moved off the road and parked when it got dark.

For dinner, they heated up some pre-packaged food in the RV's kitchen. *Nice and easy!*

The stove was fueled by a ten-pound cylinder of liquefied petroleum gas. She went with a gas stove instead of an induction cooktop because there were already a lot of appliances in the car that used electricity. The shower and heater were powered by gas as well. She was worried they wouldn't have enough juice otherwise, even with the extra generator she brought along. Gas cylinders were easy to switch out, especially when you had a bunch of spares at home.

As soon as they finished eating, Sabine and Colette went right back to the game... *Am I really that boring?!*

They departed the next morning after a simple breakfast of bread, coffee, and apples. Sabine and Colette were drowsy, which came as no surprise. They had stayed up quite late playing games, despite neither one being a night owl.

...I'm gonna need to limit their game time, aren't I? Now I know how it feels to be a mother! It ain't easy.

They were crossing the border today. Not that there was a wall or guards or

anything—the border was marked only by a wooden sign. Guards and tax collectors were stationed at town entrances instead. There wouldn't have been much point in assigning a few soldiers to guard such a sprawling, open area.

Sleeping in the car again didn't sound terribly appealing, so Mitsuha decided they were going to stay at an inn that night. And this time, she didn't care who was against it.

Actually, the RV is more comfortable to sleep in than most of the inns in this world...and we can even use the air conditioner if people don't mind the sound of the generator. There's instant noodles and other pre-packaged foods... But I'm not letting the girls sleep in here every night just because they want to play video games! That's messed up! That would ruin the fun of the trip! They can play all the games they want in the privacy of their own homes... No, wait, they'll become shut-ins! Shit, I've done a terrible thing...

As Mitsuha lamented the girls' budding gaming addiction, they passed the sign designating the border. From here on out they would be in foreign lands, where Mitsuha's status as a viscountess and Sabine's status as the third princess would fall to "a low-ranking foreign noble" and "a foreign royal way down the line of succession," respectively. They wouldn't have much authority at all in the face of commands from the local royalty and nobility.

They were likely to be treated courteously, of course. It would be a diplomatic scandal if any harm came to them, so under normal circumstances there wouldn't be much reason to fear for their safety. These could hardly be called normal circumstances, though. Mitsuha was a young lady bringing with her astounding new weapons and talk of a military alliance that any of these countries would be crazy to refuse, not to mention the fact that she was accompanied by a princess. There was no telling what someone with a certain

amount of authority—or someone who hungered for that authority—would try.

For that reason, Mitsuha didn't intend to flaunt their status when they were away from the delegation. If she did, they would constantly be targeted by kidnappers or local lords sending them invitations, which would spoil the trip. And while she may not have looked the part right now, Sabine was still a princess. Some villain could get a significant ransom for her or use her as a bargaining chip, and nobles might see a meeting with her as a perfect chance to form a connection with foreign royalty. Hiding their identities and treating this like a normal trip was the way to go.

Huh? You think this trip lost all sense of normalcy the moment I chose to drive an RV? That's different! We're tabling the subject, permanently!

That said, Mitsuha wouldn't hesitate to use Sabine's status if necessary. Power, connections, and money were weapons that were there to be used. That applied when someone simply inherited them from their parents as well—a parent's power and wealth could be wielded just as easily as one's own. And if someone called that unfair, well, it was easy enough to ignore them.

I disagree with people who say large-caliber guns are inhumane and shouldn't be used. Would it be more humane to shoot someone dozens of times with a .22-caliber peashooter before they died? A 127-millimeter rapid-fire cannon has a larger caliber than any rifle, but is anyone complaining about that?

Everyone knows that in war you want more—and more powerful—weapons than your opponent. All weapons are unfair and inhumane. War isn't a duel between knights. Any weapon that hurts people and takes lives is inhumane.

Even the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land forbids using weapons, projectiles, and other materials that inflict unnecessary pain, but it says nothing about caliber. What's "necessary" pain, anyway? And if

you do have to inflict it, what's okay to use? Eh, whatever. It's fine to use weapons when killing is unavoidable.

...Damn, that was a real rabbit hole. Long story short, I'm a fan of antiheroes who don't hesitate to do wrong for their own sake or the sake of justice. Mwahaha!

"...That's the face Mitsuha makes when she's lost in some fantasy. She won't hear a word you say, so you have to either shake her by the shoulder or just wait it out," Colette explained.

"Got it," said Sabine.

S-Shut up, guys!

They drove off once more, chatting and laughing all the while. Just as Mitsuha was thinking they ought to stop for lunch, she saw a tiny merchant caravan up ahead consisting of just three horse-drawn carts. The caravan guards were defending the carts from maybe eighteen men who surrounded them on all sides, swords drawn. It was clearly a bandit raid.

There weren't a ton of bandits in this region, but some places are just too good to pass up—like this one. If the bandits ran afoul of the authorities, they could just retreat across the nearby border, out of the law's jurisdiction. The mountainous terrain gave the bandits an elevated position from which to watch the road for prey, while simultaneously limiting that prey's visibility. The bandits couldn't risk being caught off guard by a large caravan coming along behind their victims, so they almost certainly had a scout watching the road—but the RV was apparently moving too fast for them to have seen it before they attacked.



Mitsuha wasn't actually driving all that quickly. The highway was better maintained than most roads in this world, but it still wasn't paved. It also hadn't been very long since she'd obtained her license, so she wanted to be careful driving the massive RV, which felt totally different from the car at driving school and her own subcompact. She didn't want to be known as the first person in this world to cause a car accident, and it would be awful if she got Sabine or Colette injured. She would never be able to face their parents.

All of which is to say, Mitsuha was only going about twenty or twenty-five miles an hour, but that was still astoundingly fast compared to horse-drawn carriages. If the bandits had decided no carriages would be able to disturb them until their business was concluded, too bad for them. *I mean, this isn't even a carriage in the first place.*

"...What should we do?" Sabine asked.

"Charge!" Mitsuha said immediately.

"Figures!" Sabine and Colette cried in unison.

Mitsuha stopped the car and performed a series of split-second jumps. To Sabine and Colette, it probably only looked like her body blurred a little. One thing had changed, though—behind the driver's seat there now sat one assault rifle, two SMGs, and belts of magazines for each.

Mitsuha and the girls all had pistols strapped to their thighs and left sides for self-defense, with enough collective ammunition for three times as many bandits. They would be unlikely to hit with every shot, however, and pistols wouldn't be particularly intimidating to the people of this world. A person from Earth would recognize the danger, but larger weapons would be needed to scare these bandits.

Mitsuha gave Sabine and Colette SMGs instead of assault rifles; these used pistol bullets rather than rifle bullets, so were smaller and lighter and the recoil was less intense. She also didn't want them killing anyone. They just had to spray bullets every which way to show the bandits they had no chance in a fight. If they actually needed to shoot anyone, Mitsuha would take care of it.

The three of them hurriedly equipped their magazine belts and grabbed their guns. Mitsuha then bent the flexible microphone fixed over the driver's seat toward her mouth and pressed one of the toggle switches installed on the gear shift.

"Here we go!"

The scene at the caravan was deadlocked, due to a miscalculation on the bandits' part.

Bandits tended to be fundamentally weak, most being people who failed to become soldiers or mercenaries but lacked the dedication required to get a normal job. The leaders of bandit groups were about as strong as your average mercenary, but aside from those who were forced to lower themselves to banditry by circumstances beyond their control, the rest didn't pose much of an individual threat.

This was why they put their faith in numbers, only attacking someone on the road if they outnumbered the guards by at least double. The majority of guards would surrender in that situation, and even if it did come to a fight, the bandits would be able to avoid heavy losses. Lanchester's laws also supported that approach.

This time the bandits' prey was a pitiful little caravan hardly worthy of the

name, consisting of only three horse carts, which generally meant there would be perhaps five or six guards at most. There were in fact six, and what's more, they were mercenaries, which made the bandits' job even easier—by the rules of the mercenary guild, if the enemy numbers were at least twice theirs, they could choose to surrender without it being considered a dereliction of duty. This attack could and should end without a fight.

Despite their reputation, bandits weren't fond of risking their own lives. And not just because they didn't want to die—losing comrades made future jobs more difficult, so they did their best to minimize casualties. This time they outnumbered the guards almost three to one, meaning this would be an easy raid with no loss of life... Or at least, that was what they expected.

“Why do they have almost a dozen fighters?!” the bandit leader yelled frantically.

Five additional people had joined the six guards to defend the carts, making eleven in all. Like multirole combat aircraft that could engage in dogfights in addition to dropping bombs and torpedoes, the three teamsters were former mercenaries who could fight as well as drive a horse cart, and the husband and wife who owned the cargo were former mercenaries themselves.

The five of them had been a team, saving money to retire and eventually open a small shop. The team leader and the lone woman of the group got married and became the shop's managers, while the other three joined them as investors and employees. There weren't many mercenaries who risked their lives every day and succeeded at earning enough money to leave the profession altogether, which meant they had been the best of the best. There was no way they were going to sit back and let bandits ruin the business they had worked so hard to start.

The people they hired to guard the caravan were younger mercenaries they had taken under their wing back in their active days. The teamsters and the merchant couple were capable fighters, but any bandit who saw the caravan unguarded would think it defenseless, significantly increasing the chances of an attack. The younger mercenaries had been having trouble finding work, so they were grateful to be hired.

This made it eleven against eighteen, meaning the bandits only outnumbered them by a factor of roughly 1.6. There was no way they would give up without a fight.

The members of the caravan stood firm, weapons at the ready. They showed no sign of acquiescing to the bandits' call to surrender. With these odds, most bandits wouldn't stand a chance against armed mercenaries. And even if they got lucky and won the battle, they would lose a majority of their number, devastating the group.

These were no ordinary bandits, however. They had only lowered themselves to such activities out of necessity, and they believed themselves to be stronger than the mercenaries. Plus, they still had a numerical advantage. It would've been too infuriating to turn tail and run now, and they were running low on money and food. A big haul would be necessary to keep feeding eighteen people, providing them with drink, and funding their occasional trips into town to blow off steam, when they pretended to be normal folk.

If they let this one go, the bandits had no way of knowing when the next lightly guarded caravan would come along. Peddlers who traveled with a single cart didn't have much money and only carried daily necessities, so attacking someone like that would cover food costs for a few days at best. The only way

to make any real money was to attack a small caravan with multiple carts owned by an established merchant who carried expensive items from town to town. *Too many carts meant too many guards to justify an attack, though.*

This caravan has a lot of guards, but if you really think about it, eleven is only two more than half our number, the bandit leader thought. Only two too many. And that includes a merchant couple and some teamsters. The guards might surrender once they realize we're tougher than the average bandits and not just relying on numbers to overwhelm them. That way it'll end without too many of us getting hurt. We can do this!

He was about to give the order to attack when “it” appeared.

Hoooook! Honk! Honk!

A deafening claxon blared, and the bandits and caravan members turned to see a massive object speeding toward them down the roadway. It looked like a giant monster, but then again like some kind of bizarre carriage—except that no carriage could move that fast, especially without animals to pull it. They goggled, speechless, as it continued to approach before stopping about twenty yards away.

A booming voice sounded from “it.”

“HOW DARE YOU BLOCK OUR PATH! BANDITS, THROW DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER AT ONCE, LEST YOU BE STRUCK BY LIGHTNING!”

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The bandits screamed in terror at the voice blasting from the megaphone. They were remnants of the Imperial Army that had invaded the kingdom alongside a horde of monsters. Having deserted the field of battle, fear and despair etched into their souls by Mitsuha and Wolf Fang, they had fled until

they crossed the border into this country.

“Huh?” Mitsuha murmured. “That reaction was way more dramatic than I expected...”

Guess I can't blame them for being surprised at the sudden appearance of a mysterious vehicle threatening to strike them with lightning, but there's no way they should've been that scared...

“Mitsuha, aren't those former soldiers of the Imperial Army?” Sabine asked, prompting Mitsuha to give them another look.

Oh yeah, some of them are wearing matching sets of armor, and they seem more disciplined than your average bandit. They must've recognized my voice through the megaphone... Which means they also know full well what being “struck by lightning” implies. In that case...

The bandits were inching backward, but the moment they turned to flee outright, Mitsuha stuck her assault rifle out the window of the RV and swept the ground in front of them with bullets, filling the air with the sound of gunfire and kicking up a massive cloud of dirt. The bandits stopped short, rooted to the spot and trembling with despair.

While Mitsuha swapped out her exhausted magazine, Colette thrust her SMG out of the passenger window and fired into the sky. SMGs had less recoil than assault rifles because they used pistol bullets without much gunpowder, but sacrificed a great deal of power and accuracy in return. As a result, it was dangerous to fire a warning shot right in front of an enemy, so Mitsuha had given them strict orders to fire warning shots in a safe direction unless it was an emergency or she ordered them to do otherwise. That didn't apply to when they were actually trying to hit an enemy, of course. Accuracy may be low with SMGs, but a few bullets were bound to strike home, especially at close range.

The bandits had already thrown down their weapons and put their hands in the air by the time Mitsuha finished changing the magazine. *Not because it took me forever to do it—I'm not that uncoordinated. It only took me a few seconds! Seriously!*

"CARAVAN GUARDS, PLEASE SECURE THE BANDITS," Mitsuha said through the megaphone.

The caravan guards all rushed over to the bandits and separated them from the weapons they had thrown to the ground. A few of the guards drew swords to keep the bandits in place while the rest tied them up with rope they must have had stowed in their carts. Mitsuha was impressed with their level of preparation.

Once the bandits had no way of resuming their attack, Mitsuha pulled the RV up next to the carts and got out. The bandits might have picked up their discarded weapons and given fight if they saw that the occupants were just three young girls, so she waited until they were fully bound and immobilized.

I'm used to people underestimating me because of my appearance, though I have plenty of experience taking advantage of it, too. In Japan I look like I'm fourteen or fifteen years old, while here people tend to think I'm only twelve or thirteen. Sabine is ten, and Colette is eight. Actually, she just had a birthday, so I guess she's nine. She even pestered me for a cake... Who woulda thought this world would have the same birthday culture as Earth? Must be human nature.

Anyway, I didn't want to give them the chance to underestimate us and try something. You can never be too careful.

Mitsuha walked up to the caravan members and captive bandits.

"We are truly grateful to you for saving us from danger, Lightning

Archpriestess!” said a man who looked like a merchant, as he, a woman who seemed to be his wife, the caravan guards and drivers, and (for some reason) even the bandits bowed deeply to her.

Guess I should’ve expected that reaction...

Wait, I’m even famous abroad?!

Actually, this country is right next to ours, so it makes sense people would know about me. I just wanted to say that...

It was about noon, so they decided to move off the road and eat lunch together. The bandits were not invited. The merchant said he wanted to offer food as thanks, but Sabine and Colette were opposed.

I think it would be rude not to accept his show of gratitude, though that’s not my only motivation. The girls, on the other hand, don’t want to because they know what kind of food a caravan that’s been on the road for days will have to offer. There’s no chance of any perishable foods; instead, they’re gonna have hard-baked bread, dried meat, and gross broth consisting of soup stock mixed into hot water without any other ingredients, with maybe a few pieces of dried fruit if we’re lucky. The girls would much rather eat pre-packaged foods and instant ramen, and to be honest, so would I. But rejecting their generosity would be a real no-no, and they probably have things they want to talk to us about while we eat—as do I. We need to join them.

Mitsuha did her best to convince the girls...

“All right, how about Colette and I eat our own lunch over there, and you go eat with them?” Sabine suggested.

Mitsuha was irked. “Is that what you want, too, Colette?” she asked quietly.

Her voice was quiet and kind, but the question wiped the mischievous smile right off Colette's face.

"I-I think we should eat together, yessir, that's what I think!" Colette replied quickly.

"Huh...?"

Sabine looked surprised. She probably thought Colette would side with her after how close they'd become in the last two days. It was a natural assumption, given Colette's behavior up until that moment. But Sabine was ignorant of one thing: while Colette usually treated Mitsuha on equal terms—as a close friend, even—she quickly reverted to acting as her servant when it came to important matters and other things about which Mitsuha had made up her mind. How seamlessly she was able to switch gears was a product of the perfect chemistry they had developed.

Colette switched as soon as she heard the tone of my question. She knew she couldn't be selfish with this. I don't want to eat with the caravan just to be nice, of course. I also want to see what kind of information I can glean from them, and talk about how to deal with the bandits. Colette realized this right away, and went along with my desires. She's so smart.

Sabine looked at Colette as if she had been betrayed. Her face was stiff with horror, knowing that now she looked like the only bad guy in the situation.

Crap, Sabine's gonna be really bummed if I don't do something!

Mitsuha hurriedly patted Sabine on the head, and the princess nodded, holding back tears. Sabine was a smart and perceptive girl, too. A little more prone to selfishness, maybe, given her royal upbringing, but no matter how brazenly she behaved, she never did anything that would truly upset Mitsuha.

She probably would have relented just now if Mitsuha had told her a little more firmly to join, or if they had just talked about it a little longer. They'd had many such exchanges. She was only upset now because Colette had beaten her to the punch, giving in to Mitsuha before Sabine had a chance to come around.

Don't worry about it, Sabine! It's all good!

And that's the story of the time we accepted a lunchtime invitation from a merchant caravan in thanks for our timely arrival.

It's SHOWTIME!

...Was that overkill? My bad.

The members of the caravan separated the captured bandits into three groups, tied the already bound individuals in each group together with rope, and then tied each group to a tree a good distance from the others. Escape was impossible. They probably separated the bandits into three groups so they could connect one to each of their three carts, and to prevent them from getting their stories straight and giving false statements after they were handed over to the police in town.

The carts obviously don't have space to carry eighteen people, so the bandits are gonna have to walk along behind them. If they stop walking, they'll fall and bring their whole group down with them. Then they'll all get dragged along together. This road wouldn't tear them up as badly as asphalt, but it still wouldn't be pretty.

"Please, have a seat right here!"

Mitsuha saw that they had taken down some crates to set up a table and

seats in the shade of a cart especially for them. There was even a cloth draped over the “table” to make it look presentable. The caravanners probably just sat on the ground to eat, so they were really going out of their way for their guests.

Conversation would’ve been difficult if Mitsuha and the girls were the only ones with seats, so the merchant couple were on crates as well. The rest either sat on the ground or found a large rock on which to perch.

Some of them must have prepared the meal while the others were tying up the bandits, because there was already food set out atop the makeshift table. It consisted of hard-baked bread, dried meat, dried apples, and water. There wasn’t even any soup, probably because they didn’t have enough time to boil the water. Either that or they didn’t want to make their guests wait.

Man, Sabine looks like she’s in a dark mood. It’s even worse than she expected. At least there’s a lot of dried meat and fruit—they’re giving us the best feast they can. Colette’s diet has improved significantly since moving to my residence, but she’s from an agricultural village. Dried meats and fruits are more than enough to satisfy her.

As soon as Mitsuha and the girls had sat down, the merchant couple joined them and they all started eating. There were no long speeches or toasts before the meal; they just ate leisurely and made casual conversation. The meal stretched on for quite a while as a result.

The merchant addressed Mitsuha as soon as she had taken her first bite of the hard bread. “Thank you again for saving us, Lightning Archpriestess. We are forever in your—”

“Aah, enough of that, please!” Mitsuha interrupted him. “That kind of

formality makes me feel super awkward! Call me Mitsuha!”

“Huh? But...”

It took some effort, but Mitsuha eventually convinced the hesitant couple to stop calling her “Lightning Archpriestess.” They then switched to “Lady Mitsuha,” and after some more effort, she finally got them to drop the honorific.

I’m not the kind of person who can have a normal conversation with someone if they keep calling me things like “Lady.”

“So in short, I decided to go on a trip to see the world,” Mitsuha finished.

I’m obviously not gonna spill the whole story about how we’re traveling to other countries for treaty talks. That’s a state secret that pertains to national strategy, definitely not the kind of thing I can tell just anyone. Especially not a merchant. Which is why I told them we’re just on a trip for fun.

The fact is, the kingdom hadn’t really advertised Mitsuha’s presence to other countries. It wasn’t hard to imagine how they would react if word spread that the kingdom had a little girl who single-handedly repelled an invading army. Accordingly, the official story was that an elite group of the kingdom’s forces had defeated the Imperial Army, and the rank of viscountess was awarded to a courageous girl who joined the vanguard and raised the morale of the troops.

The citizens of the capital wouldn’t believe that story, of course, nor would anyone else who was in the capital at the time—which included plenty of foreign spies and merchants. But no one was going to challenge the kingdom’s official statement, since doing so would be an insult to the nation and damage diplomatic relations. That would be problematic, especially if the kingdom truly

had received the divine protection of the Goddess.

Merchants had carried some word of Mitsuha to the commoners in nearby countries, but the rumors hadn't traveled much further into the continent... Among the commoners, anyway. The royal courts and high-ranking nobles of a number of other countries probably knew as much as the citizens of the capital, but there was no benefit to spreading the unsubstantiated rumor that a foreign kingdom was under the Goddess's protection (quite the opposite, in fact), so they kept it to themselves. Some of the better-informed low-ranking nobles had likely heard a certain amount about her, but Mitsuha was sure most of it only amounted to dubious rumors.

That's not what I'm worried about, though. It's all those portraits that could cause me trouble. How far have they spread? And how much information about me went along with them? What a disaster...

Mitsuha put that concern aside for the time being and focused on her conversation with the merchant.

"Are you headed to the capital of our kingdom?" the merchant asked.

"Yes, that's the plan. Tonight we'll stay at an inn in the first town we find on the other side of that big river," Mitsuha answered.

"Huh? But the Alum River is dozens of miles down the road." Then, glancing at the RV, he said, "Ah, never mind..."

Yeah, he saw how fast we were flying down the highway. I can tell how badly they all want to ask about it, but it seems like they're gonna hold back.

"So, are you all from this country?" Mitsuha asked. It wouldn't be fair if she let them ask all the questions—she had to get something out of this, too.

"Yes, we're what you'd call rim traders. We start in the capital, and, passing

through as many towns as possible on the way, head directly to the border. Then we make a partial circuit of it before returning to the capital. We sell goods from the capital in the border regions, and then bring goods from there back to the capital.

“To be perfectly honest, it’s quite common to find smuggled foreign goods in towns and villages near the border. They can be procured cheaply thanks to the lack of import and export taxes, so we’re able to make a decent profit...”

Wow, he didn’t have to tell me that! Well, he doesn’t have anything to do with the smuggling itself, so I guess it’s not a problem. And we both know I’m not gonna tattle on him to any government officials, now that I’ve heard about it.

“Umm, how did you find out about me?” Mitsuha asked next. That was what she most wanted to know.

“I’ve heard about you from some of our local merchants who witnessed your exploits firsthand, and from foreign merchants who’ve come to sell their wares in this country. I’ve learned some things from the merchants’ guild, too... And a business associate of mine gave me *this*,” he finished, producing one of the dreaded portraits from his tunic. It was one of the color versions that were sold after the tournament. “I always bring it with me on business trips—like a kind of good luck charm, I suppose. Who knows, it could be thanks to this that you were here to save us today.”

It wouldn’t surprise me if there were some truth to that. Fate works in mysterious ways.

“...I paid one gold coin for this portrait,” the merchant added.

“Excuse me?!” Mitsuha exclaimed. That was a hundred times the original price, which was already questionable for a simple printout.

...I mean, come on!

“It was more than worth it. I need to thank that merchant the next time I see him...”

Supply and demand pushed the portrait to that price, and the customer is satisfied. I have no right to criticize. But I still can't get over it. A gold coin for one portrait... Whatever, good for him, but still!

Mitsuha eventually learned from the merchant that the portraits hadn't circulated that widely outside of her own kingdom.

Thank goodness. I would've broken down in tears if thousands of them had been sold at that price! I put a quick stop to selling the portraits as soon as I realized the danger they posed, so not all that many of them made it to the open market. And it seems like the people who bought them in the capital held onto them. Good thing I shut it down before merchants and resale houses bought them in large quantities. Petz sure did complain about it, though.

“What would you like to do with the bandits?” the merchant asked, moving on.

Yeah, we need to figure that out. Actually, I've already decided, and I doubt the merchant will oppose me.

“I entrust them all to you, to do with as you see fit,” Mitsuha replied.

“Huh? B-But that won't do... We'll take them to the nearest town, but if you don't accept the reward money—the share of their sale into criminal servitude due to you for capturing them—and our payment for saving us without request, our reputation will suffer.”

Urgh, what a pain! But it would definitely hurt their credibility as merchants if

word got around that they hadn't paid what they owed... Still, we really can't travel at the caravan's sluggish pace. Driving the RV that slowly for a long time would be bad for the engine—particularly the spark plugs—and I wouldn't last very long before I lost my mind.

Mitsuha knew just what to do.

"Then how about this?" she said. "I'll let you keep the money in exchange for keeping quiet about us. Consider it hush money."

"Huh...?" The merchant was taken aback.

"See, it would be problematic for me if word spread that I'm traveling alone. I'm paying you the money I would otherwise receive so that you won't tell anyone. That makes this a proper business transaction, so you should feel no shame as a merchant. And you won't have to worry about what other people say because we were never here in the first place! It's a perfect solution!"

"Wha..."

The merchant and the other members of the caravan were speechless, but Mitsuha was positive this was the best way to handle the situation. She had little desire to make money by catching bandits, anyway.

"I understand why you don't want us to tell anyone about you, but you don't have to pay us for that. All you have to do is tell us not to. None among us would disobey such a request from the Lightning Archpriestess herself! You saved our lives!" the merchant insisted, sounding somewhat offended.

Whoops, didn't mean to upset him... But I can see why he reacted that way. No honest person would be comfortable accepting hush money from a person who saved their life—especially if their savior was the Lightning Archpriestess. They already feel like they're in my debt. Guess I didn't fully think that one

through...

This gave Mitsuha another idea, however. She adopted a stern expression, straightened her back, and spoke in a commanding tone.

“Faithful and honest merchant, I give you three divine commands. First: turn in the bandits. Second: spend the money you receive on feeding orphans. Third: tell no one that you met the Lightning Archpriestess. Say it was you who caught the bandits, and make sure they themselves tell the same story. Explain to them that anyone who disobeys will be struck by lightning. That is all.”

The merchant couple leapt up from the wooden crates they were sitting on, took a few steps back, then fell to their knees and bowed their heads. The guards hurriedly followed their example.

At the sight of this, Sabine spewed out the water she had been sipping in a vain attempt to wash down the hard bread in her mouth. Colette, for her part, didn’t flinch—she was hardly ever disturbed by Mitsuha’s actions anymore; she’d gotten used to it all by now.

The royal palace and some of the nobles thought Mitsuha was older sister to the king of a faraway land, who simply knew how to use a somewhat odd secret art. They seemed to interpret the “Archpriestess” title as a position she had inherited in her native country. They hadn’t shared this (correct, as far as they knew) information with anyone, however, so most of the people who were in the capital during the imperial invasion still thought she was some kind of messenger from the Goddess, that belief transforming as it spread like a giant game of telephone. Mitsuha figured that at this point, most people who had heard of her believed she was “a messenger from the Goddess who appeared at the head of a force of holy warriors,” and judging by how the members of the caravan had just reacted, she was probably right.

To be fair to them, most merchants are too cunning to believe a rumor like that at face value. But they're also people who know how to prepare for the worst. There's no harm in behaving as if that rumor is true, because on the off chance I am a messenger from the Goddess, it would be dangerous to offend me. Playing it safe was the best option. They've seen the RV and the guns, after all.

And so it was decided that the caravan would do as Mitsuha said and turn in the bandits.

Mitsuha spent the rest of the meal asking the merchant about this country and its capital, and once the extended lunch break came to an end, they all prepared to resume traveling. Since the merchants hadn't made a cooking fire, that didn't take them very long.

...What about us, you ask? All we had to do was hop back in the RV, so it took literally one second.

Mitsuha drove slowly and waved back at the caravan once they returned to the road, then turned around and stepped on the gas.

Full throttle, baby!

...Sorry, that's not true. I'm going twenty miles an hour.

Even with breaks and moving off the road to let other carriages pass safely, they had traveled just over sixty miles by evening. Crossing the river as planned, the town soon came into view.

"All right, time to get out. Grab your things!" Mitsuha called, making Colette and Sabine shoulder their overnight bags. Mitsuha grabbed hers as well, and

they hoofed it into town looking like proper travelers.

Driving the RV into a town would be a terrible idea. There's no telling what would happen to it after we parked it—or to us. Actually, I have a pretty good idea. That's why I'm leaving it at my house and walking. I doubt we would be let into the town in that thing in the first place; they might mistake it for a monster and attack. Safety first, safety first...

After the two girls got out of the car, Mitsuha looked up and down the road to make sure no one was there, then jumped to the rural American town she had previously selected with the contents of their sewage tank in tow.

Don't worry, I practiced this with water plenty of times. Failure would mean catastrophe. Any mess I made might be taken as a malicious attack and trigger World War Pee.

Mitsuha guided the contents of the sewage tank directly into the dump station and jumped right back. The tank was so pristine that there was no need to sterilize or deodorize it. *Damn, world-jumping is convenient.*

She then emptied the water tank on the side of the road, jumped the RV to her house leaving the few drops of water left in the tank behind, and returned to the other world after making sure the vehicle was locked up tight.

You have no idea how nice it is not having to worry about cleaning the tank!

All the people who saw the RV parked off the road were going the other way, so they wouldn't enter the town after Mitsuha and the girls. And Mitsuha had passed the people going the same direction as them using consecutive jumps, so they only caught a brief glimpse of the RV at a distance. That meant there would be no one in the town making a fuss about it. *Perfect!!*

Feeling pleased, Mitsuha set out toward town with Sabine and Colette beside

her.

“I’m so tired, Mitsuha...” Sabine whined almost immediately. “I want my bike...”

“No way! You would stand out way too much riding it into town! We left the RV behind to *avoid* drawing attention to ourselves!”

“Urgh...”

Colette, on the other hand, was totally fine. This distance was trivial for someone who grew up in a rural village.

“I’m so tired. I want Scooty...” Mitsuha whined a little later. *I misjudged the distance to the gate. It’s still really far away...*

At long last they reached the town. The gatekeeper stopped them and asked a lot of questions—it wasn’t every day three (seemingly) underage girls showed up alone on foot—but they hadn’t done anything wrong and had plenty of money to stay at an inn, and it was clear from their clothing that they weren’t street urchins or hoodlums, so he let them through with a warning to stay away from bad folk.

The first order of business was finding a room. Mitsuha had a last resort if all the inns were full, but she didn’t want to use it the very first time they looked for lodging. They started by following the main street toward the center of the town.

It’s unlikely any men on the street are gonna try to hit on three well-dressed

children. Well, I only look like a child, but still. Unless we run into a kidnapper in a back alley or something, we shouldn't be in any danger...

Wait, now that I think about it, Sabine was kidnapped right outside my store! That street's hardly a back alley, and it has a decent amount of foot traffic. I guess I shouldn't be so optimistic. We need to do our best to stay away from the edge of the road so we don't get pulled into any alleys. But if we walk too close to the middle, we could get run over by a carriage... Walking down the street is more complicated than I thought...

While Mitsuha was lost in these thoughts, they reached the center of town. It was unsurprising considering that this was a roadside settlement near the border rather than the capital city, but the walled section was not very large. Most of the farmers, ranchers, and miners lived outside the wall, which was really only there to protect the people in the event of an attack. And the larger an area it enclosed, the harder it would be to defend.

Anyway, time to look for a nice, safe inn.

The reason Mitsuha picked the inn she ultimately did was simple—one of the three girls caught a whiff of something mouthwatering wafting from the kitchen and couldn't resist going inside. And who was that person, you may ask?

Okay, fine, it was me! The smell was really enticing! You would've done the same!

"Welcome!" a cheerful voice called out when they entered.

...Yep, she's a plump old lady. I guess it's only in manga and novels that you find a young catgirl sitting at the counter. Bummer... Well, nothing for it. I'll have to prepare the young catgirl myself.

What about Colette and Sabine? They're too old! I'm talking five or six years old! That would be really cute!

"Please, sit anywhere you like!" the old lady said, clearly thinking they were there to eat. She probably assumed they were sisters whose parents told them to eat out because they would be home late from work.

...But I refuse!

"Actually, we'd like a room... Though we will be getting something to eat as well," Mitsuha replied.

The old lady's eyes went wide. "Huh? You want to stay? Where are your parents?"

"It's just us. A room for three, please. Oh, and don't worry. We have money."

I'm just gonna pretend I'm twelve years old while we're on this trip. Almost everyone in this world thinks that's how old I am, so she probably wouldn't believe I'm eighteen anyway. The biggest advantage of people thinking I'm younger than I am is that they constantly underestimate me. That can get me in trouble because of the dangerous nature of this world, sure, but it also makes it easier to turn the tables and escape in a pinch. It's the same as how sustaining six light injuries is better than three heavy ones—since you're guaranteed that none of them will be fatal.

The old lady looked dubious, but she accepted the money without further comment. She had no reason to turn away children if they paid up front.

They got the key from her, and decided to eat before going to the room. The aroma was the whole reason Mitsuha had chosen this inn in the first place, so she didn't want to put off eating any longer.

"I want whatever it is that smells so good!" Mitsuha requested.

“Me too!” Colette said.

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Sabine chimed in.

Hey, where’d she pick that up?! I never showed her that DVD...

The source of the aroma turned out to be stewed wild boar. The meat was cut into small cubes, flavored with finely chopped ginger, then reduced until there was virtually no broth left.

And when the three girls took their first bite...

“IT’S DELICIOUS!” they exclaimed in unison.

Judging by the salty-sweet taste, the cook must have used some sugar and a sprinkling of expensive spices. Even a little bit of spice was enough to change the flavor drastically. The ginger hid the faint smell characteristic of boar meat, and the size of the chunks gave it a slight chew that was satisfying for young jaws.

Venison is the best when it comes to steak, but boar meat is better for stewing.

Colette said that back in her village she had gotten to eat boar on rare occasions, but it had never been anywhere near as good as this. The villagers probably skipped any such careful preparations and just tore into the meat, and there was no way they had expensive spices like these. Sabine had apparently never tasted boar at all. *It must not be luxurious enough for the royal family...?*

A meal consisting of nothing but boar meat wouldn’t have been good for Sabine and Colette’s growth, so Mitsuha also ordered vegetables and, at the old lady’s recommendation, sweet potato jelly for dessert.

That was so satisfying!

When they were done, they went up to their room on the second floor. It was small and cozy, with two bunk beds.

Right, makes sense that the inn would have a bunch of four-person rooms and give them to parties of either three or four. That's way more efficient than preparing separate rooms specifically for three.

All right, I need to give the girls equal treatment, so I'll let them have the two bottom bunks and take one of the top ones for myself, Mitsuha thought, but Colette and Sabine each rushed toward the beds and claimed a top bunk before she could say anything. *Ah, I should've known they'd be more excited about the top...*

Colette and Sabine climbed down, looking relieved that they'd secured their desired bunks. It was still a little early to go to bed, so it was time for some girl talk. Which wasn't a whole lot different from what they did in the RV all day.

They seem unusually excited. Is this the first time they've ever stayed in an inn? Colette has probably never traveled anywhere other than my county, and it's highly unlikely Sabine has stayed anywhere other than the royal palace... This must feel like a field trip to them! We slept in the RV last night, but that's not the same as really "staying" somewhere.

That means it's time for one of the great overnight field trip traditions...

PILLOW FIGHT!!!

...Just kidding. We'd get yelled at by the other guests or the proprietress.

Sabine and Colette got into bed once drowsiness overtook them, and Mitsuha burrowed into the blankets of her bottom bunk.

Chapter 33

Decision Time in Japan

Mitsuha and the girls had breakfast at the inn the next morning then left the town on foot. They had to check out of the inn, and they couldn't jump away as soon as they got out the door or make the RV suddenly appear on the street, so walking was the only option. They were once again stopped and questioned by the gatekeeper on their way out of town, but he eventually let them through.

After they had been walking for a little while, an unsettling feeling came over Mitsuha. She turned to see three shady men following them, almost certainly harboring bad intentions. Three well-dressed girls leaving the town on their own must've seemed like easy prey. Fortunately, Mitsuha had expected this. They wouldn't try anything yet—the town was too close, and they were still within view of the gate.

The road curved, and a stand of trees blocked them from the men's view. At which point—

Whoosh.

The men followed the road around past the trees and stopped dead in their tracks. The girls were nowhere to be seen.

"Welcome to my humble Japanese abode!" Mitsuha proclaimed.

"Huh?!" Sabine and Colette reacted with wide-eyed shock.

“You heard me. This is the Yamano clan residence in Japan.”

Also known as “my place.”

The girls looked around the room, speechless.

Sabine and Colette had been working hard to study Japanese in the other world. Sabine wanted to watch DVDs without Mitsuha’s simultaneous interpretation, while Mitsuha wanted Colette to learn the language because she was her future aide. She also wanted Colette to study modern politics and methods of territory management so she could govern Yamano County when Mitsuha wasn’t around.

I got Colette hooked on learning Japanese by having her watch anime and DVDs, too. Worked like a charm!

They were both still young and absorbed information quickly, and the allure of being able to watch DVDs whenever they wanted to without needing Mitsuha’s help gave them an almost frightening drive to learn. Already, they could speak a kind of broken Japanese. Their listening was better than their speaking—they still stumbled over their words, but they could understand the gist of most of what Mitsuha said, as long as she didn’t talk too quickly.

Sabine and Colette really are geniuses. Their intelligence far surpasses other children their age in that world. You don’t find many...kids like them...

Images of the schemer girl at the orphanage, the boy named Loik who had made the stall, and his assistant Manon popped into her head.

How are all the kids in that world so talented?! Well, their civilization may be behind Earth’s, but the people probably possess about the same level of intelligence. They just lack the knowledge we have. If you brought children from that world to study in Japan, they wouldn’t turn out any different from the

average Japanese person. Actually, given their physical strength and outlook on life and death—their general preparedness for life, in other words—they would probably far surpass us.

Maybe I should start sending children from Yamano County to study abroad on Earth... No, no, no, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm busy enough with what I already have on my plate. I'll revisit that idea another time. Sabine and Colette need my attention right now.

"This is my emergency safehouse. And it's located in the country where the DVDs you're always watching come from. That means people here speak the 'Japanese' you've both been learning," Mitsuha told them.

"Wowww!"

Mitsuha showed them around the house, but they were already familiar with the modern bathroom, the television, the air conditioning, and more from her residences in the other world, so there wasn't much to surprise them.

"This house is tiny..." Sabine muttered.

H-Hey! I guess I'm not surprised she'd think that, given she lives in the royal palace and only ever visits noble mansions and my capital residence a.k.a. Mitsuha's General Store. She's probably never been to a commoner's house... But still, she should apologize! My father built this place himself and worked hard to pay off the loan!!

"I-It's just a safehouse..." Mitsuha said, her voice trembling.

"B-But it has an exotic flair! I like it!" Sabine added hurriedly, clearly realizing her blunder.

Ah, give it up!

They had checked out of the inn rather late, so it was already ten in the

morning. Time to get going.

“Okay, we’re going out, so change into these!” Mitsuha said, pulling some clothes out of a drawer and handing them to the girls.



“What are these?”

“They’re normal clothes in this wo—this country. You’ll stand out too much in the clothes you’re wearing now.” Sabine and Colette’s outfits would both attract attention in Japan, though for entirely different reasons. Thus Mitsuha had prepared these clothes beforehand. “Once you change, we’re gonna go say hello to the neighbors, then hit up a department store.”

“A-A department store?!” they exclaimed.

Just the reaction I expected! They’ve seen a lot of department stores in the anime I’ve shown ’em on DVD.

Sabine and Colette got changed with astounding speed. Mitsuha then took them around to greet the neighbors.

“They’re the daughters of a relative who married a foreigner. Their dad transferred here for work, so they’ll be visiting every now and then,” Mitsuha explained.

“Nice to meet you!” the girls said in Japanese, just as they’d been taught.

They greeted the police officer at the neighborhood station next, then got in Mitsuha’s subcompact and headed off to the department store.

There’s no chance in hell I’m gonna drive the RV around town. I only just got my license, and I don’t have any confidence I could drive that beast through crowded streets or fit into a tight parking space. This baby is small, and I’ve gotten at least a little used to it, so that’s what I’m driving!

Mitsuha had introduced the girls to her neighbors and the police as a precaution. Aside from the quick jumps to empty the sewage tank or leave the

RV at her house, she had been with them the entire trip. There might be times when she would have to act alone, however, and she didn't want to leave them by themselves in the dangerous other world, so on such occasions she would bring them to Japan and have them wait in her house. She was sure they'd be fine with it if she gave them snacks and a game system.

But leaving them in this world carried its own risks. What would they do in the event of a robbery or a fire? And what if something happened to Mitsuha in the other world and she never returned? Mitsuha was making the rounds with the girls so they would be able to seek help in such circumstances.

She also intended to tell them about a spot under the floor in her house where she had buried a sealed container about three feet down. It contained detailed instructions on how to contact Wolf Fang's captain so he could help them quietly collect the money from her "deep pocket" and her Swiss bank account, which they could then use to support themselves. Mitsuha had also put a letter for the captain and other necessary documents in the container.

The odds of the girls being left alone in this world were slim, and Mitsuha would do everything she could to prevent it, but she needed to prepare for the worst. She wouldn't overlook any possibility when it came to their safety.

Mitsuha parked in the department store's garage and they went inside. She'd made it very clear they were not to touch anything, so they didn't have any real issues as they walked around. The only problem was how much Sabine and Colette stood out: two cute foreign girls, acting as excited as if they were at a theme park—you couldn't miss them.

At least it's noon on a weekday, and none of the people I know who work here are around... I can put up with it this time...

“Hey, if it isn’t Mitsuha! Long time no see.”

Nooooo! We just ran into a gaggle of my old classmates’ moms!

The women grilled Mitsuha with endless questions about Sabine and Colette and how her life was going. They spoke way too rapidly for the girls to understand much of anything, and it took over half an hour for Mitsuha to extricate herself. Feeling exhausted by the ordeal, she decided to move their lunch plans up and head straight for one of the restaurants in the department store.

It’s time for today’s main event!

“Wh-What is this?!”

“Oh, is this...?”

Colette and Sabine both reacted with surprise when the waitress set their meals on the table. Mitsuha had ordered for all three of them. It would’ve taken forever for the girls to order for themselves, and she was too tired for that. She knew what they liked—they still had children’s palates—and was positive what she ordered would satisfy them.

That’s right, I got them each a kids’ meal!

Mitsuha had once thrown together a makeshift kids’ meal for Sabine at Paradise, the diner that had hired her as a consultant, but it couldn’t hold a candle to the ones offered at this restaurant. Unlike the mass-produced frozen foods you found at many restaurants, this one offered juicy handmade Hamburg steaks, perfectly cooked spaghetti, exquisitely fried shrimp and croquettes, smooth pudding made from scratch... But best of all was the omurice. It was properly coated with cheap ketchup instead of being violated

with demi-glace, white sauce, stew, or cream sauce, and the egg itself was nice and thin, just like it was supposed to be, not some ridiculous fluffy creation.

This is the real deal!!!

Most kids' meals were made for toddlers through to kids in their first years of elementary school, but this paragon of omurice was made to be enjoyed through the end of elementary school, and it was big enough for an older kid as well.

I've always looked young for my age, so I kept ordering this through my middle school years when I came here with my family, but I finally had to stop once I reached high school. I looked like a middle schooler at that point, plus I was scared that someone I knew might see me eating it. But now I have the perfect excuse for ordering it again! I'm just introducing Sabine and Colette to omurice, and getting the same thing as them since I'm their guide! Oh, how long it's been since I've had this glorious kids' meal!

Mitsuha didn't think the waitress would tell her to get something else when she had two little girls with her and looked no older than fifteen herself, but just in case, she decided to order by pointing at the menu, holding up three fingers, and speaking in the language of the other world. She was hoping that even if there was an age restriction on the kids' meal, the waitress would let it go because she didn't want to deal with trying to explain the situation. The plan worked perfectly: when Mitsuha pointed at the picture of the kids' meal and spoke in some unrecognizable tongue, the waitress's eye twitched and she rattled off what seemed like every English word she knew—"O-Okay, roger, yes ma'am!"—before quickly retreating.

Woohoo! Victory!

The three plates—or, platters—were delivered to the table not long afterward.

This restaurant stuck a flag in its kids' meals, but didn't include a toy. They were traditionalists, and staked their reputation on the food alone.

Mitsuha dug her spoon into her omurice, and Sabine and Colette imitated her. They attacked the meal with fervor, wordlessly wolfing down their food until suddenly all three plates were empty. Sabine and Colette then looked up at Mitsuha with imploring chihuahua eyes.

Worry not! I'm thinking the exact same thing! Yoohoo, waitress lady! Come on back!

Mitsuha burped.

I ate too much... And Sabine and Colette look like they're suffering even more than me... Maybe two kids' meals and four desserts was a little too ambitious. I bowed out after three desserts, and I still feel horrible...

I was planning on taking them to a bookstore after lunch, but I think we'd be better off going right home. I can barely move, and... Well, my stomach is telling me I'm in desperate need of the ladies' room. We need to hurry—wait, crap! There's only one bathroom in my house, and there's three of us!

"U-Umm, Mitsuha..."

Uh-oh, Sabine's not even gonna make it home. Actually, it's better this way. There are a lot more toilets here at the department store. Colette looks ready to burst, too.

All right, to the nearest bathroom! Move out!

Later that night, after the battle of the bowels, an impeachment trial began in

Mitsuha's house. Sabine was the judge, Colette was the prosecutor, and Mitsuha was the defendant. She had no lawyer. She didn't feel like she had a chance in hell of victory.

"Why haven't you brought us here until now?! Do you have any idea how much of our precious lives we've wasted?!" Sabine shouted.

"Yeah! Even if there was a reason you couldn't, you should've at least brought us takeout!" Colette added. She was in friend mode rather than vassal mode, and wasn't holding back. Mitsuha could tell from her tone that she was genuinely angry.

Mitsuha turned to Colette first, thinking she would be easier to convince. "The lunch you ate today cost two small gold coins."

"Wha..." Colette turned pale and fell silent.

All right, that's one enemy ship sunk! Too easy!

Colette had developed her sense of money in a small village where families didn't have much cash income. Spending two small gold coins would've been unthinkable for a family's last meal before they all committed mass suicide, let alone lunch for one child. If they had two small gold coins, there would be no reason for a family to kill themselves in the first place.

One small gold coin is worth about 2,500 yen, so I'm not even lying.

Mitsuha then turned to Sabine. "Do you want to live here if anything happens to your home?"

"What...?"

This was a question Mitsuha needed answered.

"If the capital were attacked again like it was when the empire invaded, but

this time I couldn't bring a band of mercenaries, you know what would happen, right? The kingdom would fall."

"Y-Yeah..."

Sabine's a smart girl. She knows exactly where I'm going with this.

"If that happened, would you want to abandon the kingdom and live as a commoner, either here or somewhere else on your continent? Or would you go down with the ship as a member of the royal family? In other words, I'm asking if you would want to tie your fate to your family and your people, or if you would want to start a new life," Mitsuha finished.

Sabine spent some time thinking and then asked, "Would I be with you? Or would I be alone?"

Yeah, that's an important question.

"I can't say. We might escape together, or I might make a mistake after evacuating you here and die. In case of the latter, I've made sure you'll have a guardian and enough money to live on, so you won't want for anything. The odds of you ending up here alone are pretty slim, but you should be aware of the possibility.

"I'm also going to bring you here any time during this trip I think we might be about to face danger. And I need you to be clear that if anything happens to me under those circumstances, you'll never be able to return, regardless of the state of the kingdom. You would have to live in this wo—this country without me. Again, I think the odds of that are vanishingly low, but not zero.

"If you don't want to face that risk, I'm going to have you rejoin the delegation when we meet up with them next. Okay?"

Sabine didn't answer for the rest of the day.

Phew, okay, managed to avoid any more questions about lunch!

It wasn't until the next morning that Sabine responded.

"I think my parents and my siblings would rather I live on in a new land than die along with them... And that's what I want, too. I want to live with you and Colette, and even if I'm alone, my survival would mean the royal line would not perish. I could start a new family here in this country!" Sabine declared, looking every bit the noble. "And I want to keep traveling with you, of course. Anything that could kill you would mean the deaths of everyone in the delegation, anyway."

"M-Mitsuha, that hurts..."

Before Mitsuha knew it, she was hugging Sabine as hard as she could.

Mitsuha spent the whole day teaching the girls how to use all the appliances in the house, what to do in an emergency, where the survival kits were, where and how deeply important things were buried, and everything else they needed to know. She wrote instructions for all the most important things, using the language of the other world so that people from Earth wouldn't be able to read them. People from the other world would, of course, but that didn't matter.

They got pizza for lunch. Mitsuha was looking forward to their reaction, but they were no more excited than she had expected.

Next she taught them how to place an international call to the mercenary captain, and showed them where she'd hidden a voice recorder with a message for them to play him over the phone. With it she left a letter, and showed them

how to mail it internationally. There was more to teach them, but she could do it over time.

Mitsuha took the girls to a yakiniku restaurant for dinner. It was a little pricey, not the all-you-can-eat kind. *Taking a princess to a cheap place would've been a good way to sit through an hour of shit-talking about Japanese meat. And more importantly, I can call this a business expense and invoice the king for it!*

“Whooooaaaahhh!” Colette exclaimed.

Sabine chewed ferociously in silence, captivated by the taste.

Behold the overwhelming might of Japanese meat! You are powerless to resist!

“I’m sorry about this, Sabine. I wanted to take you to a better place, but that would’ve been a little expensive...” Mitsuha said with regret in her voice and a smirk on her face. Her words had no effect on Colette—the girl couldn’t seem to process that more delicious meat could exist—but Sabine growled audibly. She realized that Mitsuha was only bragging about how good Japanese meat is.

Mwahaha, wallow in your kingdom’s inferiority!

I’m not getting them any raw meat. It would’ve been safe to eat at this restaurant, but they could get sick if they ate it at some dubious place while I’m not around, or ordered a chef in the other world to make it without proper instruction. That’s why I’m only letting them eat properly cooked meat.

Yakiniku restaurants served more than just meat, naturally, so once they were done, they moved on to dessert. *We may be full, but you know what they say—everyone has a second stomach for dessert.* They ordered every flavor of ice cream on the menu.

“Urgh...” they all groaned a little while later. Their stomachs rumbled audibly.

Guess we didn't learn our lesson...

That night the three of them took a bath together and slept in Mitsuha's full-sized bed.

I bought a larger bed even though it would make my room more cramped because I couldn't stop falling out of bed at night. I never thought it would come in handy like this...

The detour to Japan had been necessary. They were going to resume their trip the next day, and Mitsuha had to get the girls comfortable being here in preparation for the times she might have to leave their side for an extended period of time. There was no way she could leave two beautiful young girls unguarded in the other world, especially when one of them was a princess.

Rescuing them would be a cinch if they were taken hostage, as long as she knew where they were being held. But if they were captured and sold illegally as slaves, she would have virtually no chance of finding them on her own. That was why Mitsuha had to get them used to her house and the surrounding area. She needed to teach them how to deal with any unforeseen event that could occur while they were staying there alone, and prepare them for the possibility that she might never come back to retrieve them.

I would've come up with another option for Sabine if she said she didn't want to live in this world, but there turned out to be no need for that. Oh, Colette? I asked her the same thing a while ago. I think it goes without saying which world she chose. She was worried about leaving her parents at first, but she said she had an older brother and sister, which was news to me! I thought she was an only child!

Her sister moved to a neighboring village when she married upon turning fifteen, and her brother was working in Bozes County. Colette dropped another bombshell as well: her mother was pregnant again.

I think I know how that happened! Her parents finally have the place to themselves now that Colette moved to my domain!!

Can I just have Colette, then? If they want a dowry, I'll happily pay it!

Colette also explained that she would be in the most danger out of anyone in her family if the kingdom were to be invaded. Who was in power had little effect on the lives of farmers. No new ruler would mistreat them—they were an important source of tax revenue. And any fighting was unlikely to reach her distant farming village. So as long as they didn't institute conscription or some such, there was no reason for Colette to worry about her parents.

She herself was in a very different position, however. She was a potential vassal for a noble house, and a cute girl on top of that. She was just the kind of person an invader would choose to make an example of on the gibbet, or turn into their personal pet. Her presence could even put the rest of her family in danger. That was why she had told her parents that if the kingdom ever fell, she would escape with Mitsuha to a new land and live happily ever after there with her.

...Hold on, didn't they have anything to say about that?! Well, she's not wrong. If another fleet of ships arrives from that maritime nation, young people—good-looking ones, especially—would be the first to be shipped off as slaves. Young people stand a better chance of surviving a long voyage without much food or water. Yep, Colette sure would be a popular slave! ...I can't imagine a worse way to be popular.

That means Colette and I are in it together, now. Same goes for Sabine. The

bond would come undone if they ever got married, though. Then it would be the role of their respective husbands to protect them.

Colette's voice echoed in Mitsuha's head. "We'll live happily ever after in a new land!"

Surely she didn't mean it that way... Right?

Mitsuha and the girls departed the next morning after a simple breakfast in the kitchen. Their first stop was a gas station to refuel. This was the first time Mitsuha had taken the RV to this station, and she shocked the staff when she pulled up. Mostly because they were unsure if she could reach the pedals.

I elected not to do self-service. I'm afraid of doing something wrong and spraying gas everywhere, and if I got out and went about my business, a bunch of adults would probably come nosing around, thinking I was a middle schooler without a license who'd stolen my parents' camper. That even happens when I drive my subcompact, so I can't imagine how people would react if they saw me get out of an RV... That shouldn't happen here, though. I've filled up my car at this station any number of times. Now I just have to convince them I can reach the pedals...

Could I just fill up cans of gas and bring them to the other world...? No, that wouldn't work. The RV's tank is way too big—I'd have to find a secluded place to make umpteen round trips with a twenty-liter gas can. Not only would carrying it be a pain, buying that much gas would probably get me reported to the police for violating fire-prevention laws.

Wait, isn't it illegal to use a self-service stand to fill a gas can anyway?! Man, that was close! I could've gotten in big trouble!

Once the tank was full, Mitsuha drove to a supermarket parking lot, waited until there was no one around, and jumped. Jumping while they were moving could be dangerous—she didn't want to drive the massive vehicle on anything smaller than a main road, so it was hard to guarantee that their arrival would go unobserved.

She then jumped back to the water treatment plant in her town and jumped again with water from the reservoir—water that had been filtered and disinfected with chlorine and was about to be distributed to the town, in other words—in the perfect shape to fit the RV's tank.

This is the easiest and most hygienic way to get water for the RV.

What? You think I'm stealing? Urk... I'll make tons of money and pay plenty of municipal taxes, I promise!

“White Rook, this is King One!”

The king's voice was the first thing Mitsuha heard when she jumped the RV back to the other world. The alternator powered the wireless radio while the vehicle was running, so Mitsuha just left it on all the time.

“This is White Rook,” Mitsuha answered.

“What have you been doing?! I was beside myself...!”

I explained to him over and over again that I wouldn't be calling him every day! I have no way to reach him when we're in a town and away from the car!

“White Rook, this is White Home. What happened?! I've been so worried...”

Count Kolbmane chimed in on the delegation's radio. He must have been waiting by it with the power on. Mitsuha had told him that transmitting would consume a great deal of divine power, so he probably left it to the king to

actually raise her.

Oh, “White Home” is the call sign for the delegation. I’m using “White” for allies, “Black” for enemies, and “Gray” for anyone I’m unsure of. I chose “Home” because the delegation is the “home base” of this trip. I didn’t use the “Base” part because the White Base in Gundam ended up getting shot down, which seems like bad luck. Superstitions are important.

Mitsuha worked to calm the king and had Sabine explain to him all over again that they were only going to call occasionally, rather than every day. Once they had him convinced, they repeated the explanation to Count Kolbmane. There was no way he could reject what the king had already accepted, especially when the king was listening.

But we already went over all this, and they were okay with it then! Well, they can’t complain about it anymore, not after Sabine was the one to explain it to them. Not even the king is a match for her... Wait, is Sabine the most powerful person in the kingdom?!

“We will be arriving in the capital city of Mathrica in three days’ time. I will call you on the ray-dee-oh at noon the day before to give you an update, so please be ready,” the count said.

“Understood. I’ll talk to you at noon in two days,” Mitsuha responded, and ended the call.

Any number of things could go wrong while traveling by carriage: broken axles, rain-muddied roads, bridges washed away, landslides, you name it. Messengers had been sent ahead to give forewarning of the delegation’s arrival, but because of the unpredictability of travel, the schedule for the talks would be decided only after they reached the capital. As such, there was no real point in calling Mitsuha in two days to give an update on their progress; he

probably just wanted to make sure Mitsuha and the girls would be waiting in the capital when they got there.

I keep my promises, I'll have you know.

The first set of talks were to take place in Mathrica, the capital city of the kingdom of Dalisson, a friendly neighboring country that had already been informed of the foreign ships' arrival. Many popular reports had surely reached their ears already, and it was also likely they had dispatched agents to collect information in Bozes County, Yamano County, and the capital.

The delegation wasn't visiting every nation on the continent. They would skip those that were too far away, as well as some of the bordering countries. The king had sent special messengers to the latter or invited members of their royalty or nobility to the capital instead, and apparently tours of the captured ships were being prepared for those who were interested.

This meant the delegation was only visiting distant-but-not-too-distant countries that were friendly, or at least neutral. There was no reason to go out of their way to teach hostile nations about the new weapons the kingdom was developing.

What if the foreign ships land in one of those countries, you ask? They'll get ransacked and ask our alliance for help, which we'll grant by sending a multinational force—but only after they sign a lopsided treaty. Politics and war aren't child's play, I mean, come on.

The delegation was also prioritizing coastal nations. Landlocked ones would probably reject the alliance because they weren't in immediate danger, and it would be difficult to convince every country to join on the first attempt anyway. The powerful countries would want to claim leadership of the alliance, and would definitely try to monopolize the new weapons.

The best thing will be to wait for those countries to approach us and beg to join the alliance. Landlocked countries have no reason to build ships anyway, and they'd probably refuse an order to contribute funds for doing so. We can't give them the rifled breech loaders and cannons in exchange for a little pocket change.

That's the advice I gave the king, anyway. The ultimate decision was up to him and the other leaders, so it was the will of the kingdom. I'm not in charge here.

Chapter 34

Mathrica

Mitsuha and the girls arrived at the capital city of Mathrica just past noon. The delegation was making good time, but a car could do in a few hours what took days for a procession of carriages, even with Mitsuha driving at a leisurely pace.

She emptied the sewage tank and left the RV at her house like last time, then each of them grabbed a backpack and a flask of water to hang at their hips.

“All right, we’ve got three days until the delegation arrives, let’s see what this city has to offer!” Mitsuha cried.

“Okay!” Sabine and Colette cheered in response.

“Are you three girls alone?” the old gatekeeper asked, looking at them suspiciously.

“Yup!”

They were used to this skeptical treatment by now.

“Our guardians are a little ways behind us. Grown-ups are such slowpokes, so we went on ahead. We’re gonna have fun in the capital ’til they catch up!” Mitsuha explained cheerfully.

The gatekeeper looked flabbergasted. “Are you crazy?! What would you have done if you were attacked by a wild animal or ambushed by ne’er-do-wells?!”

And it's not just bandits you have to worry about—there are plenty of people who would get wicked ideas seeing three well-dressed girls walking the road alone. Your parents must be worried sick! Don't you feel any responsibility to protect your little sisters...?"

He kept scolding us for almost an hour, damn it! He clearly means well, though... Seems like a good guy, in fact. I'll bet he thinks we snuck off while our parents were busy with work. Which is a natural assumption—no parent would knowingly allow their kids to go on ahead by themselves.

The gatekeeper insisted they wait in an office at the guardhouse until their parents arrived, but after Mitsuha told him they had already agreed on a meeting place and would go straight there, he reluctantly let them go.

Geez, that was close. We almost got stuck there for three days. To be fair, I highly doubt the old man thought we were three full days ahead. I could've jumped us away while no one was looking if I had to, but that would've caused a scene, so I tried as hard as I could to convince him. That was beyond exhausting.

"Okay, first order of business is to find an inn," Mitsuha said. "We need to choose a relatively luxurious one so as not to bring shame on the kingdom when they learn we're members of the delegation. I'm gonna invoice the king for this later anyway, so money is no object!"

"You're way too rich to be so cheap, Mitsuha," Sabine said.

H-Hey, that's mean! Way to hit me where it hurts!

"...Okay, let's try this place."

An inn's exterior could advertise its luxury—that is, its high prices—but there was no way to tell its quality until you actually stayed there. Mitsuha selected

an expensive-looking inn near the royal palace that seemed like a good bet, then charged through the front door.

Not that I ran in with a battle cry or anything. Doing that in a luxurious inn near the royal palace would be a one-way ticket to the slammer. I just strode in with confidence.

“A three-person room, please.”

“And where might your guardian be?” the middle-aged man at the front desk asked.

This again...

“It’s just us, actually,” Mitsuha replied.

“I don’t know what kind of game you think you’re playing, but we don’t allow kids to stay here alone. Go on, scram! I’ll hand you over to the city watch if you get in the way of our business!”

Mitsuha could feel herself getting pissed.

I can’t blame him if that’s the rule, but he didn’t have to be so rude to us. If he was a greenhorn clerk I could’ve chalked that up to inexperience or delusions of grandeur, but this guy is old enough to know better. His attitude is probably a good indicator of the spirit of this inn.

“How dare you—”

Sabine began, but Mitsuha patted her on the shoulder.

“It’s fine. We don’t want to stay at a place like this anyway, right?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Mitsuha led Sabine and Colette outside, leaving the infuriating establishment behind to search for somewhere more promising.

“...Let’s try this one!” Mitsuha said when they reached the next inn. It was slightly smaller and older than the first one, but it looked decent.

“Think this one will be okay?” Sabine asked worriedly.

“Can’t know unless we go in!”

Colette looked like she didn’t care at all where they stayed, nor did she seem bothered in the least by being turned away from a high-class inn. It was unlikely she would take issue with any lodging they chose.

“Charge!” Mitsuha cried.

“Welcome! Have you come to stay?” a voice called out as soon as they walked through the door. It came from a man who looked around twenty, standing behind the front desk.

“Do you have a room for three? We don’t know how long we’ll be staying yet,” Mitsuha replied.

“Not a problem. Please sign your names in the register,” the clerk said cheerfully.

Now that’s customer service!

Two days later, in the morning, Mitsuha jumped to Yamano County with Sabine and Colette. She felt she needed to at least check in on occasion.

I’m not concerned about how things are going with the domain, I just expect people are getting anxious about me. The place isn’t gonna fall apart just because its lord is gone for a few days. If any domain were that unstable, then

forget about me and my world-jumping power, most nobles would never even be able to leave to visit the capital. The citizens can manage just fine on their own... I hope.

Mitsuha jumped them straight to her own room to avoid startling anyone by appearing right in front of them. She led Sabine and Colette out of her room...

“Lady Mitsuha!”

...where they were immediately found by Noelle, a ten-year-old girl who had nearly been sold into a decades-long apprenticeship (read: human trafficking) before Mitsuha hired her. *Well, I guess “found” isn’t really the right word; she just happened to be there when I opened the door.*

Noelle smiled at Colette, with whom she was friendly because they were close in age, then dashed off to tell everyone that Mitsuha was back. *It’s so nice to see Noelle smile all naturally like that... She’s brightened up so much.*

The assembled servants gave Mitsuha their reports, and once she had confirmed that there were no issues, she returned to her room to take care of the real reason she’d returned to her county residence.

“White Home, White Home, this is White Rook, over.”

“This is White Home Leader. Can you hear me?” came Count Kolbmane’s voice.

Mitsuha was contacting the delegation the day before their arrival as promised. It would’ve been a hassle to retrieve the RV and jump it outside the city every time she wanted to reach them, so she’d decided to use the radio at her residence. At that distance, the delegation would have been too close for UHF and VHF frequencies to work reliably, and there was a chance HF frequencies would get caught in a natural radio quiet zone. Contacting them

with the HF band from her room would be more certain to work. The antenna there was better, too. Since she had so much space, Mitsuha had been able to forego a loading coil and set up a full-size horizontal dipole.

“You’re coming through loud and clear,” Mitsuha replied. “Are you on schedule?”

“Yes, proceeding as planned. We are maintaining SOA, as you put it. We should still arrive tomorrow afternoon. I sent messengers ahead to announce our arrival and secure lodging near the palace. Let’s meet at our inn.”

“Understood. See you tomorrow.”

“Indeed.”

SOA stood for “speed of advance,” which indicated the average speed someone must travel to reach their destination at a specified time. It’s calculated by dividing the distance to be traveled by the remaining time until one is scheduled to arrive, and can be used to express how one is progressing along an intended route, such as “an hour at SOA” or “five minutes behind SOA.”

After Mitsuha’s call with Count Kolbmane, Sabine joined Colette, Noelle, twelve-year-old Ninette from the fishing village, and the four-year-old apprentice maid Leah—who together made up the Yamano Munchkin Maids—for some playtime.

Actually, I think Leah is five now...? And Colette’s not a maid, but let’s not split hairs. I introduced Sabine not as a princess, but as a candidate to become my vassal in the capital, putting her on the same level as Colette. That’s what Sabine herself wanted. I doubt she gets many chances to shed her royal persona and play with friends as equals. It would’ve been impossible for her to act like a

maid, of course, and Colette was already treating her as a friend, so it was definitely the right call. And she fit in just as well as I thought she would—she really is something special.

“About ready to get going?” Mitsuha asked, thinking they should return to the inn soon.

“Aww...” Sabine looked dejected.

She must’ve really enjoyed playing with the other girls like she was one of them...

“Don’t worry, you can come back any time.”

“Kay...”

Sabine was mature for her age. She did grumble on occasion, but she could judge when it wasn’t the time or place to throw a tantrum. It was also likely she didn’t want to embarrass herself in front of the younger girls.

Once they said their goodbyes, Mitsuha jumped to the inn with Sabine and Colette to wait for the delegation’s arrival the next day.

...What about the three days in the capital? It was fun, but we didn’t do anything particularly noteworthy. We just did some sightseeing and ate at some food stalls. You know, normal touristy stuff. Dalisson is just the next kingdom over, so it’s not all that different. There’s no way something dramatic like getting kidnapped or pickpocketed or harassed by an obnoxious young noble is gonna happen every time we go out, especially when we all look like we’re around ten years old.

In six years Sabine will be sixteen, Colette will be fifteen, and I’ll be a twenty-four-year-old who looks twelve... Arghhhhh!

Just past noon the next day, Mitsuha and the girls had finished their meal at a restaurant and were wandering the streets. They needed to find the delegation as it arrived because it would be difficult to discover where they were staying after the fact. People would probably be suspicious of three little girls sniffing around for the whereabouts of foreign envoys, so it was unlikely that the staff of any inn would volunteer that the delegation was staying there. They might think the girls were trying to hassle their guests by begging for money or employment, which would reflect poorly on the establishment. That was why Mitsuha wanted to find them *before* they checked in.

A little while later, the girls spotted multiple employees walking out of a luxurious inn to wait by the entrance. They would only do that for special guests...such as the aforementioned foreign envoys, for example.

“Hey, they’re over there...” Mitsuha said, pointing.

The delegation was approaching the inn, led by a man they had sent ahead to contact the royal palace and arrange their lodging. Count Kolbmane’s carriage stopped in front of the inn’s entrance with mounted guards in front and behind. Guards then jumped out of the nearest carriages to secure the area. The coachman signaled once everyone was in position, and the carriage’s door opened. The two maids got out first to make sure it was safe, followed by Count Kolbmane and Clarge.

Mitsuha and the girls waited until they had gotten out, then approached.

“Get rid of them!” a middle-aged clerk barked at some of the younger employees, who hurried dutifully toward the girls.

Shoot, I'd better do something or they're going to keep us from reaching the count. Not that I really care, but I'll lose it if they so much as lay a finger on Sabine or Colette.

"Count Kolbmane, we've been waiting for you!" Mitsuha called out as the employees rushed to bar their way. Guards from the delegation drew their swords and quickly stepped between the girls and the inn's employees. There was no way they were going to let commoners harm their princess and a viscountess.

"Wha..." The hotel crew was shocked to see the guards defending not the members of the delegation but the three girls. Their bared steel and menacing attitudes froze the young employees in their tracks, and left the middle-aged clerk at a loss for words.

Hey, I remember him. He's the jerk who kicked us out the other day!

"Don't move! Our guards will cut down anyone who takes so much as a single step toward them!" Count Kolbmane said sternly. "We may be foreigners, but nevertheless, I cannot overlook any insult to a princess of the realm and the head of one of our noble houses. Had you behaved the same way toward this delegation, I suspect there would have been no repercussions even had we slain you on the spot."

"D-Did you say 'princess'?" The middle-aged employee was stunned. He must have had a position of some authority, given the way he had ordered the younger staff around.

"Your Highness, Viscountess Yamano, are you not staying at this inn?" the count asked.

"No, we're not. We wanted to initially, but that man threw us out, so we went

elsewhere,” Mitsuha replied. “Is this where you’ll be staying, Count Kolbmane?”

The count glared at the clerk and answered dispassionately. “No. We’ll be finding another inn.”

Yep, saw that coming.

“H-Hold on! The delegation was supposed to stay with us—” the employee protested desperately.

“And you are?” the count interrupted.

“M-My apologies. I am Golphon, assistant manager of this inn...”

Wow, so he’s not just a clerk... I guess that makes sense. They wouldn’t send just anyone to welcome a foreign delegation. It’s actually weird the manager isn’t here... Oh, maybe he’s waiting inside to greet them.

It must’ve been a coincidence that the assistant manager was at reception when we tried to get a room. Either way, his behavior reflects on the inn as a whole. I could’ve given the place a second chance if it was just a young clerk who treated us that way, but this is more than enough reason to refuse to stay here. I would’ve felt bad about harming the inn’s reputation because of one new employee’s mistake, but now I don’t need to hold back.

“The princess and viscountess clearly have no desire to stay here, which means we of the delegation cannot do so either. It is our duty to accompany the princess. Or do you have some reason to separate us from her?”

“N-No, not at all! We would be honored to have the princess and her companions join you at our humble inn.” The assistant manager was nearly frantic.

“Huh? But earlier, you turned us away without a second thought,” Mitsuha put in.

“Th-That was because I was ignorant of your status—”

“You kicked us out based purely on our appearance, without giving us a chance to tell you who we were. I don’t want to stay at an inn that operates that way. Do you, Sabine?”

“Not a CHANCE!” Sabine declared with an exaggerated grimace.

Not like there was any other possible response.

“All right, we’re going back to our own inn. Will you all stay here, Count Kolbmane?” Mitsuha asked.

“Of course not! We’ll stay at the same inn as you. Please, lead the way,” he responded, sending the assistant manager into a full-blown panic.

“P-Please wait! Please! This will cause great harm to our reputation...”

“Why should that matter to us? We are staying elsewhere because you insulted our princess and a noble of our kingdom. It’s as simple as that. There’s nothing unusual about it—except perhaps for the fact that we didn’t kill you for such an affront.”

“Eeek!”

The delegation followed Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette away from the inn. It wasn’t far, so Count Kolbmane and Clarge joined them on foot. The mounted guards and carriages trailed behind. Mitsuha heard a fuss erupt behind them, but it wasn’t her problem. Glancing back, she saw someone who might have been the manager grilling the assistant manager about what had just happened. *Sucks to be him.*

“Excuse me, our companions just arrived. Is it okay if they stay here, too?”

Mitsuha asked.

The clerk at reception was the same twentyish man she'd spoken to the day they arrived.

"Yes, of course. How many more will be staying with us?" he responded.

Uhh, how many are in the delegation again? I'll have to leave this to the count.

"Sorry, you're going to have to do the rest yourself," Mitsuha told Count Kolbmane.

"Hm? Oh, I see. Hmm, we number—" he began, before an attendant burst through the door and raced toward them.

"P-Please, my lord, stop! You should leave such trivial tasks to us!" he cried, fixing Mitsuha with a fierce glare.

Um, I am a viscountess, you know...

Well, I guess that was my bad. The attendants would probably be disgraced if anyone back home heard they had allowed the count to check into an inn by himself. Sorry...

But the fact is, the count actually looked excited to do something for himself for once, so I don't think they have anything to worry about! Clarge looked iffy about it, though...

"Huh? You're a diplomatic delegation from another kingdom? And you have a princess with you? Whaaaa?!"

The clerk had kept it together when he learned of Count Kolbmane's noble rank, but he was unable to hide his surprise when the count's attendant

announced the purpose of their journey and the fact that they had a princess with them. This was a luxurious inn and likely got plenty of noble guests, so receiving a count was nothing too out of the ordinary. The man may also have been a little taken aback to learn that Kolbmane was with the girls, since they hardly presented as nobles, but an elite clerk like him would never let it show.

Hearing that they were part of a diplomatic mission changed everything, though. It meant his new guests represented the king of a foreign country, and this inn would be the face of Dalisson during their stay. That brought immense responsibility, pride, and honor. It was unheard of for such a delegation to arrive with no forewarning.

“Wh-Why have you chosen our inn? And why did you send no word...?”

“Because Princess Sabine wanted it that way,” Mitsuha replied.

“Your sincerity proved to us that this is indeed a good inn,” Sabine added.

Whoa! Sabine can act like a princess?! ...Act like the princess she is, I mean. I knew she was smart, but I always figured she was still kind of immature and self-involved... Wait, why is she glaring at me?! Can she read minds?!

Anyway, I was not ready to see her act so prim and proper... Maybe I should bestow on her my title of “Plumber of the Opera” after all.

The clerk blushed as anyone would after being praised by a smiling princess, even if she was only ten years old. Being the professional he was, however, he quickly regained his composure.

“Y-You honor me with your generous words!” he said, and rang the bell on the counter to call for support. He struck the bell in an odd pattern; there were probably different signals he could send depending on how he rang it. Mitsuha suspected that this one meant “All hands to battle stations!”

The door opened within seconds to reveal an elderly man at the head of a troop of employees. The man was the inn's manager; he regularly came out to greet the guests as they ate, so Mitsuha remembered his face. The bell must have been signaling a state of emergency, but he was perfectly calm. *This inn continues to impress.*

"These guests belong to a foreign diplomatic delegation. Please prepare their rooms immediately," the clerk said, explaining the situation quickly and concisely.

The manager caught his breath. The bell had surely given him some idea of what to expect, but he couldn't have predicted anything like this. His eyes went wide for a moment, but he showed no other sign of emotion.

"I am Woldeth, the manager," he said. "Welcome to our humble establishment." He entrusted Count Kolbmane and Clarge to a bellhop, then began to give out rapid-fire orders. He didn't want to make high-ranking nobles like them wait even a moment. It was the inn's top priority to escort them to a special room that was always kept ready for such occasions.

The delegation's attendants busied themselves with unloading luggage from the carriages and preparing for dinner and tomorrow's meeting. They had plenty to do, but the count would probably give them some leeway given the sudden nature of this change in lodging.

...Us? We're already staying here, so no one has to worry about us. The staff were probably surprised to learn that Sabine's a princess and I'm a viscountess, since I'll bet they thought we were just merchants' daughters, but that's it... Oh, I wonder if they'll panic when they realize they brought the count to a special room, but left the princess in a regular one. That should be good for a laugh, so I'm not gonna say anything.

“...Do you have a moment?”

Count Kolbmane and Clarge had been led to their rooms, and the rest of their entourage had gone out to the carriages with the inn’s employees, leaving Mitsuha and the girls alone with the manager and the young clerk.

“Why did you choose to stay here? Most guests of your standing choose to stay at The Fairy’s Rest”—that was the name of the inn that had kicked the girls out—“which is closer to the palace and regarded as the top inn in the capital...”

Mitsuha raised her hand to stop the manager there.

“I had two reasons: the superior customer service of your clerk, and the difference in ideals between your two inns. A little bit of kindness goes a really long way.”

The manager bowed deeply, and the girls returned to their room.

Man, I sounded cool back there!

“...That was so dorky, Mitsuha.”

Or not...

A knock came at their door a little while later. It was Count Kolbmane’s personal attendant, announcing that his master wanted them to come to his room. The count was understandably hesitant to barge into a room occupied by three girls, one of whom was a princess.

He probably wants to talk about our visit to the royal palace...

“You wanted to see us?” Mitsuha said as they stepped into Count Kolbmane’s room after a few cursory knocks.

“My apologies for summoning you,” the count replied, bowing toward Sabine before turning toward Mitsuha. “Our meeting is only two days from now, and I thought we might discuss it...”

Sabine ranked higher than Count Kolbmane because she was royalty, but she was only here as an observer, and to lend weight to the delegation’s authority. The count was the king’s real representative, but he couldn’t treat Sabine as if she were lower than him, so he addressed Mitsuha instead.

What’s my position? Hmm... I guess you could call me an advisor, or a kind of subcontractor. The king is paying me, after all.

Mitsuha and Count Kolbmane got down to business.

Instead of visiting every nearby country, the delegation was prioritizing friendly and neutral countries with at least some coastline. They were also going to visit an appropriate selection of friendly landlocked countries and major powers that weren’t too far away.

We’d have to be crazy to try to do a circuit of every country on the continent. Sabine and Colette would be adults by the time we made it back home, and I’d be past marriageable age... Maybe that’s an exaggeration, but it would take a really long time. And there wouldn’t be much point in signing treaties with countries located too far from our kingdom anyway. Expert diplomats are being sent to countries with particularly ticklish issues, and the king decided it would be most effective to invite representatives from the bordering countries to show them the ships and cannons in person. We’re only negotiating with a small selection of countries.

...Then why were we assigned to visit Dalisson, which does in fact border our kingdom? First of all, it's along the delegation's route, so it's not costing us much time. Second, their proximity to our kingdom probably means they know a fair amount about me. They might take it as an insult if the great Lightning Archpriestess passed through their country without a word. And finally, the current de facto ruler of Dalisson is a young princess.

"The king of Dalisson is bedridden with illness, and his eldest daughter, Princess Remia, is taking care of affairs of state on his behalf. However, there are forces trying to elevate the first prince, yet but a small child, and thus steer the country in the direction they desire," Count Kolbmane explained.

"Hm, I see..." Mitsuha murmured.

The queen was already dead, and Dalisson could very well descend into chaos if the king didn't recover. Such disorder in a friendly neighboring country would be less than ideal, especially under the present circumstances. There was a chance other countries would take advantage of Dalisson's turmoil to meddle in its affairs, and the conflict could even spill into neighboring countries.

"So we should help strengthen the princess's position?" Mitsuha asked.

"Exactly. You catch on quick," Count Kolbmane said, exhibiting a rare smile, startling to see on his usually stern face. Clarge looked impressed, too.

...Oh, stop. You're making me blush.

Mitsuha and the girls ate dinner with the delegation afterward. They were in a room reserved for only the chief members, so the maids and guards were not present.

I can tell Count Kolbmane, Clarge, and the others are excited at this rare

opportunity to socialize with Sabine. The king is extremely soft on her, and I do mean extremely. Plus, she's cute, smart, and level-headed as hell. She'll marry a high-ranking noble or a foreign royal when she grows up, maybe even some crown prince or something. So getting in good with her could have huge benefits down the line.

"Viscountess Yamano, has it not been difficult traveling separately from the delegation? Perhaps you should rejoin us..."

"You're free tomorrow, right Mitsuha? We should go sightseeing..."

"My lady, I have an enticing proposal regarding the sale of local specialties..."

"The subject of finding a spouse for the count's son has come up. You know, I could put in a good word for you..."

"Would you like to play shogi later?"

Ooh, that's smart. Shogi would be a great way to monopolize my time for an extended period... Wait a second! It's me they're after, not Sabine!

Mitsuha spent the rest of the meal pleasantly chatting with the other attendees.

I might be traveling separately, but we're still working together. There's no need to make waves if I can avoid it. I'm perfectly capable of socializing like an adult. The fundamental Japanese skill of making no commitments or definitive statements and always forcing a smile really comes in handy!

Mitsuha and the rest of the delegation had breakfast with the maids and the guards the next morning. Count Kolbmane and the other dignitaries were visibly

unhappy about it, but they had to relent when Mitsuha told them Sabine wanted to eat with the common folk. This wasn't a lie, but there was another major reason Mitsuha and the girls wanted to eat breakfast with the whole crew: to keep the members of the delegation from asking about their plans and offering invitations while they ate.

The trio rushed back to their room as soon as they had finished eating, and Mitsuha jumped them out of the inn so they could explore the capital on their own. Anyone who did go so far as to look for them in their room would find it empty.

Our disappearance isn't going to worry any of the staff of the inn, though. I told the nice clerk on the day we arrived that we'd be eschewing the main entrance to avoid anyone who might want to follow three pretty young girls, so he shouldn't panic if we suddenly disappeared from our room or seemed to reappear out of nowhere. I said we'd be leaving through the back door, climbing out the windows, maybe even crawling under the floor or through the rafters... He took it as a joke, but said we could do as we pleased because we had paid in advance. He did tell us not to complain if we got mistaken for robbers and arrested, though.

"Time to go," Count Kolbmane said with a sour expression. He had been unable to find the three girls at all the previous day. Clarge looked just as cranky.

We didn't take any chances yesterday! We ate dinner out, then jumped right back to our room when it was time for bed!

The gifts the delegation had brought from the kingdom were loaded into the carriages. Sabine and Colette didn't have to carry anything at all, while Mitsuha

just had a rifle case slung over her shoulder—which, as the name implied, held the rifle she would use to demonstrate the strength of their new weapons. She had intentionally chosen an old model; showing them the latest assault rifle would have been beyond overkill.

All three girls had pistols equipped in holsters on their thighs and under their left arms. They decided against knives, since it wouldn't do to be discovered wearing recognizable weapons in the presence of royalty and nobility. They had to wear skirts to hide the thigh holsters. Sabine wore a frilly dress she had packed in the delegation carriage, while Mitsuha and Colette opted for similar but Japanese-made ones.

Dresses made in this world for nobility are absurdly expensive, and you can find dresses just as nice in Japan for way less money...though Sabine and Colette were horrified by the panties the first time I had them try on Japanese clothing. They're definitely less protective than the bloomers girls wear as undergarments here.

Anyway, the members of the delegation are gonna take care of the negotiations and the gifts and whatnot. My only job is to demonstrate the rifle and answer questions as the delegation's technological advisor. All Sabine has to do is be present and smile, and Colette just has to melt into the background and not draw attention to herself.

All right, let's move out!

"Welcome to Dalisson. I trust your journey was an easy one."

Princess Remia was a beautiful girl with sharp features and clear eyes who looked to be around sixteen years old.

...Sure, she looks much older than me, but that's because she's white. She somehow looks beautiful, dignified, cute, and sweet all at the same time. Hmm, what would be the best way to describe her... I guess she looks like...the textbook definition of a princess! It's uncanny!

Count Kolbmane and Sabine knelt before Remia where she sat atop a dais in the throne room. Sabine was also a princess, but Remia was the first princess, second in the line of succession, and was currently acting on behalf of the king. By contrast, Sabine was the third princess, fifth in the line of succession, and a good deal younger and less experienced. She was also a visitor seeking audience in Remia's land; she had no choice but to defer to Remia's rank.

Mitsuha and Clarge were a little way behind them, with four attendants at their back. The rest of the delegation was waiting in a different room. Some of the guards had been stationed in the carriages to prevent anyone from Dalisson fishing for diplomatic documents or the captured weapons, not that anyone in the delegation was foolish enough to leave those behind. *The radio's in there, I guess, and we wouldn't want anyone finding that.*



This audience was purely ceremonial—all they were doing was greeting the princess and presenting their gifts in front of the assembled courtiers. They weren't going to hold the actual talks in front of so many eyes and ears. Once the ceremony ended, all who were participating in the talks headed for the conference room.

Now for the real deal.

Chapter 35

The First Meeting

It's finally time for the first diplomatic meeting! I'm so nervous! I mean, I've talked with our king lots of times, but those were just personal conversations. This conversation isn't between people, it's between countries. That gives it a whole different weight.

...Not that I'm actually gonna be doing any of the talking. That's Count Kolbmane's job. Plus, this is just a preparatory meeting for the official treaty talks that'll take place at a later date. But still.

They had moved to a conference room for the meeting, and the Dalissonian side was represented only by their key leaders. Remia would lead the talks for them, which was to be expected given the importance of this meeting. The other attendees seemed to be chancellors and government ministers and military brass and the like. Mitsuha didn't know any of their actual titles.

"Let us waste no time getting to the purpose of our visit," Count Kolbmane said after a brief round of introductions. "As I'm sure you're already aware, we are here to discuss the matter of the foreign ships that attacked our kingdom.

"The enemy staged a unilateral assault with three giant warships, each large enough to carry hundreds of soldiers equipped with powerful new weapons called 'cannons' and 'guns.' They demanded sovereignty, treasure, and slaves."

The Dalissonian side of the table buzzed with consternation upon hearing the invaders' extreme demands. They knew about the enemy fleet, but only Mitsuha, the king, and his closest advisors knew what she had discussed with

the invaders, so none of the particulars had gotten out.

“Fortunately, we captured all three warships before they could inflict much damage on our shores,” Count Kolbmane finished. A snicker went around the room at the offhanded way he described their bloodless victory over such formidable opponents. But everyone in the room already knew about the captured ships. What they didn’t know was the strength of the enemy’s weapons.

“Are you saying the enemy nation is nothing to fear? That they are no threat to us, either?” one of the Dalissonian ministers asked, voicing what everyone was thinking.

These talks are going nowhere if we allow them to think that...

“Well, they are nothing to fear...if you happen to have the Goddess’s protection when the enemy attacks,” Kolbmane said. “Had the Goddess not saved us, the invaders would be carrying off treasure and a great many slaves even as we speak. We would be a vassal state, trembling in fear as we awaited the arrival of our new governor-general.”

Cries of astonishment filled the conference room. The Dalissonian leaders never expected to hear those words from a kingdom with an army powerful enough to repel an imperial invasion with minimal losses, killing two ancient dragons and driving another off in the bargain. Mitsuha figured they knew most of the details of that event, aside from the true identity of the soldiers she had summoned. It must have been a little hard to believe such a country would be no match for three measly ships.

Count Kolbmane was slightly exaggerating, of course. The crews of those three ships alone could not have occupied the entire kingdom, and their cannons were no threat to the capital because their range was limited to a few

miles. But they might have been able to use the threat of those weapons and the power of their homeland to force the kingdom into a one-sided treaty. The next fleet might very well have carried many more soldiers, along with a governor-general to rule the new colony. So while he was exaggerating, he wasn't just blowing smoke—he was simply compressing the inevitable sequence of events.

“As such, we hope to form an alliance with our neighbors in preparation for the coming of the next enemy fleet,” Count Kolbmane went on. “The purpose of our visit is to explain the situation and hear your thoughts and opinions before the official treaty talks take place.”

“So your kingdom intends to initiate the talks *and* serve as mediator?” someone scoffed.

It wasn't unusual for the initiator of diplomatic talks to mediate them as well. Being the mediator came with a variety of benefits, however, so a major country like Dalisson was not going to give that up lightly.

“Yes, that is our intention. But it is not simply because we're the ones initiating the talks. The enemy warships, cannons, and guns are in our possession, and we have naturalized most of their former soldiers—the only ones who know how to produce and handle these things—as citizens of our kingdom. We are therefore uniquely qualified to develop the technological skills to recreate them,” Count Kolbmane answered.

There was no argument. The truth of his words was all too apparent. No other country *could* serve as mediator. Opening up the role to anyone else would simply lead to conflict as a multitude of countries put themselves forward for the role. Dalisson's leaders may have been reluctant about it, but they could see that their neighbor was most fit for the job.

“Are these new weapons really as powerful as you say? Your soldiers easily defeated the enemy forces, did they not?”

“No, we would have stood no chance if it came to open combat. Their small numbers and limited supplies might have been an issue, but we would’ve had no way of defeating them without suffering heavy losses. All we could have done would be to wait for them to run out of resources. And now that they know of this continent, they’ll see it as a hunting ground where they can take all the slaves and treasure they want. And next time, they will send sufficient ships and soldiers...”

Silence overtook the room.

“And you’re willing to demonstrate the strength of these new weapons for us?” Remia, who had remained silent until now, suddenly spoke. “That’s what that bundle is for, am I right?” She pointed at the long case Mitsuha bore.

Wow, she’s sharp! You never know what you’re gonna get with royalty, but she’s a good one. Guess this means it’s my turn.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Mitsuha replied.

“...And you are?” Remia asked.

“I am Mitsuha von Yamano, technological advisor to this delegation.”

“Huh? You’re the one who...” Remia trailed off, looking startled. A stir swept through the Dalissonian contingent.

Hmm, I wonder how much they know about me... Do they think I’m just the brave noble girl the royal palace announced me to be? Or are they aware of the open secret in the capital that I’m a princess from another land who has special abilities thanks to my connection with the Goddess?

"I don't know what you mean by 'the one,' but I *am* Viscountess Yamano," Mitsuha said.

Remia's eyes shone as she gazed silently at Mitsuha.

What is she thinking... But man, she really is something. Beautiful, dignified, cute... It's like she was grown in a lab to be the perfect princess. Sabine couldn't be more diff--ahem, uh, never mind.

"Well, there is no point in continuing until you show us the strength of these new weapons. We'll talk afterward."

At the princess's eminently reasonable suggestion, the meeting was suspended for the time being. *That's fine with us. We expected they would want to see a demonstration first.*

The attendees filed out of the conference room and headed toward an arena in the courtyard.

"Arena" might be pushing it. It's just a grassy area no bigger than an elementary school classroom, for entertaining contests of strength during garden parties or whatever. No building or seats for spectators. They did set up a man-sized wooden figure and put armor on it, though. They sure are prepared...

An audience was waiting for them when they arrived in the courtyard. This demonstration wasn't openly advertised, but it was a rare chance to see the unveiling of a powerful new weapon, so people of authority from the royal palace and the army were gathered there to watch. *Of course people want to see it--this weapon could change the course of war in this world forever.*

Remia, Count Kolbmane, and the other attendees stopped at the edge of the

small field they called the arena. Mitsuha, Colette, and Sabine walked to the left edge of the arena and faced the armored wooden dummy standing on the opposite side, about six yards away.

“Umm, could you please move it back? It’s a little too close,” Mitsuha requested. The dummy was currently at an appropriate distance for a pistol, maybe, but not a rifle. After some discussion, she got them to move it to the edge of the courtyard in front of an artificial hill. This eliminated the danger of hitting someone by accident. It was now about fifty yards away, which was still a little close, but Mitsuha decided to go with it.

There was a small wooden platform set at the firing position for Mitsuha to use as a shooting rest.

I’m tiny, which means I have small palms. I don’t have a lot of muscle, either, so the older American gun I’m using is both too big and too heavy for me. It’s not the gun’s fault; it has flaws by modern standards, but it was known for its excellence in its time. It’s just not a good fit for me. I chose to use a shooting rest to increase my accuracy, because holding the gun steady would’ve been difficult for me otherwise.

I’m not out here to show off. I don’t need to try to hit the target while my hands are shaking from the weight of the gun. Setting the gun on something will make it much easier to aim... I guess that’s pretty obvious, huh?

With all eyes on her, Mitsuha pulled the case off her back and took out the rifle. It was an M1 Garand, the first standard-issue semi-automatic American rifle, their primary infantry weapon in World War II.

The M1 Garand had a number of strengths and weaknesses. Its biggest strength was that it was the most complete semi-automatic rifle ever made at the time. The biggest weakness was that the ammunition was fed by an *en bloc*

clip. That made reloading difficult, as you couldn't replace a clip until you exhausted all eight bullets loaded within it. If you were low on bullets, you had to waste whatever remained so that you could reload. Though that hadn't been much of a problem for the American army, with its endless supply of bullets.

I chose this gun for the demonstration because its composed only of wood and iron, which gives it a nice, dignified appearance, plus it's reliable, and you can use it as a single-shot breechloader if you want to. It would've been way over the top to show them the full capabilities of a semi-automatic or automatic firearm.

Remia, Count Kolbmane, and the rest of the spectators were about three yards off to Mitsuha's right, while Sabine and Colette had taken up a position about a yard diagonally behind her.

She set the barrel on the wooden rest, placed the side of her right hand on the bolt, and pulled it as hard as she could. Unlike on a bolt-action gun like the Type 38 rifle, which required use of the bolt between every shot to eject the shell casing and reload, this was just a small protuberance. Still, it took Mitsuha a lot of effort to pull it down, and doing so too often would be difficult and painful.

If she had been firing blanks, the insufficient gas pressure would have rendered the gun unable to eject and reload automatically, which would have forced her to pull the bolt every time. That would've been hell. Fortunately, she was using live ammunition and didn't need to worry about that.

Mitsuha pulled the small bolt, moving the breechblock back and locking the chamber open. Normally you would load it by pushing a clip containing eight bullets down into the chamber, but instead she pulled a single bullet out of her pocket and inserted it. She made sure to keep her thumb from being crushed by

lifting it off the follower before releasing the lock. The gun was now loaded with a single bullet.



By the way, this isn't the model that uses .30-06 Springfield bullets, but the later one produced in small quantities for the Navy, which uses 7.62 mm NATO bullets. That's what the captain of Wolf Fang got for me when I told him what I wanted, maybe because the bullets are easier to obtain and more compatible with a wider range of guns.

Mitsuha was about to fire, but she engaged the safety anyway just as the captain had taught her. She planted her feet, got into the proper stance, and took aim. Only then did she disengage the safety.

She had already adjusted the rear sight back at the mercenary base by turning the windage to zero, turning the elevation to the very bottom then raising it twelve clicks, and zeroing the rifle. The first shot would be slightly less accurate because the barrel was cold, but she didn't have to be precise. All she had to do was demonstrate that she could hit the armor from fifty yards away, and that would be a walk in the park.

Mitsuha took a few slow breaths in and out, then sucked in a minimal amount of air and held her breath. She pulled her trigger finger back so gently that she was barely even conscious of doing it, so softly that she herself did not know when the bullet would be fired. Gently, softly, like a feather landing on a pillow...

Bang!

The recoil lifted the barrel into the air, but not before a slim 7.62 mm bullet was fired from its bore.

Gunshots sound much cooler in an indoor shooting range because of the echo. It's just a short blast outside. But at least it's loud.

That was the only bullet in the gun, so the breechblock moved back and

locked, leaving the chamber open. Mitsuha pulled a second bullet from her pocket, loaded it just like last time, and fired it with considerably less care for her aim. She wanted to hit a vital point with the first shot, but with the second she wanted to demonstrate how quickly another bullet could be fired, so she was satisfied with simply hitting the armor. She had zeroed the rifle for fifty yards assuming the target would be about this far away, so she was confident she wouldn't miss. Most of her practice had been at two hundred yards, and she had improved enough to hit the target with five or six of the eight bullets in a clip. *Not like I always hit the bullseye or anything, but still, that's pretty good.*

Mitsuha looked to her right after the second shot. The spectators were looking at her open-mouthed and wide-eyed, seemingly startled by the gun's explosive report. *If they're this surprised by the sound alone, just wait 'til I show them the damage!*

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, let's go inspect the target!" Mitsuha led the crowd over to the armored dummy. They all gasped in shock.

Sweet, the first shot hit the dummy in the heart, and the second hit around the cecum! Actually, I aimed both shots dead center, about four inches above the navel, but no one has to know that. They're probably assuming I meant to hit the heart. Mwahaha!

"It...penetrated the armor..." someone murmured.

Huh? That's what they're surprised by?

The bullets had penetrated the armor and gone straight through the dummy, emerging out the other side. Such a weapon would render shields and armor pointless. And it had been fired by a girl who looked to be only about twelve years old. This meant that people without any combat experience—women, children, the elderly, even the sick and injured—could kill hardened soldiers who

had undergone years of harsh training. And they could do it from dozens of yards away with just the flick of a finger.

Any soldier or government official would react with astonishment upon seeing that.

“So, this is what we call a ‘gun,’” Mitsuha said. “Cannons are similar, but they shoot projectiles twenty times as large, and twenty times twenty times twenty—that’s eight thousand—times as heavy, which can strike targets miles and miles away.”

The Dalissonian contingent was stunned, dumbfounded.

Only half the people in the armies of this world were combatants. The other half made up the supply train, which was tasked with transporting essential goods and supplying other types of support. What they call “logistics” in the modern military. A vast number of civilians also supported the army by working in research, manufacturing, transportation, and a variety of other fields. An army of ten thousand required at least thrice that number of citizens to support it.

Soldiers put themselves through years of training, made possible only by taxpayers’ labor and hard-earned money, but faced with a foe carrying this new weapon, they would be dead in seconds. And if the enemy weren’t just soldiers? If every woman, child, and senior citizen were armed with one...?

That’s never actually gonna happen, but after seeing me—a girl so petite I could enter a competition for World’s Weakest Person—do what I just did, that nightmare is definitely screening in Technicolor in all their minds.

They would’ve been scared enough if a seasoned soldier had performed the demonstration, and they were rendered speechless when Mitsuha claimed

there were weapons far stronger even than this.

“The goal of the treaty we’re proposing is to build a unified front against the invaders, who possess weapons like these, and to work together to create even stronger weapons for our defense. This is only a preliminary conference. The official treaty talks will come later, so you’ll have plenty time to make a decision. But if you decide not to join us, you’ll have to fend for yourselves when the enemy returns.”

“Th-That’s...” Remia gasped, something approaching horror in her voice.

Totally appropriate response—I essentially said, “Join the alliance or be destroyed.” Even if the invaders never come back, they’ll be stuck using swords, spears, and bows while surrounded by an alliance of countries armed with these new weapons. Our proposal is as good as blackmail, and she knows it. No wonder her voice shook. But that’s how diplomacy goes in this era—gunboat diplomacy, blackmail, it’s all fair game. Stunts like this had been pulled over and over again throughout Earth’s history.

After the demonstration, everyone returned to the conference room. The Dalissonians were still speechless. Count Kolbmane waited in silence, giving them time to digest what they had just seen.

A little while later, Remia spoke up. “...We never really had a choice, did we?” Her tone was one of calm resignation.

“Your Highness, what are you—?!” One of her retainers began to argue, but Remia silenced him with a hand.

“Hold your peace. I am no fool, and nor, I think, are any of you. You wouldn’t be in this room, otherwise.”

No one could argue after hearing that. They all understood perfectly well.

“We are not trying to force you into anything, Your Highness,” Count Kolbmane said. “We are simply inviting you to join us in a pact to strengthen both our countries and prepare ourselves against a common enemy. You are free to refuse and prepare in your own way, and we will leave you to your own devices without resentment or reprisal. Nor do you have to come to a decision now. This is only a preparatory meeting to inform you of the situation and help you reach a consensus before the official treaty talks. Our countries have long been amicable with one another, and we wish it to remain so. You have nothing to fear from us.”

It's not like this is a bad offer for Dalisson. We're simply giving them an opportunity to get on board with the winning ticket. If there's any hesitation, it's probably coming from wounded pride. We're in a position of overwhelming strength in these negotiations, and they can hardly afford to turn us down... You'd think it wouldn't be that big a deal because we've always had friendly relations, but I guess it's not that simple.

Oh, damn it! I forgot! We're supposed to help strengthen Princess Remia's position. I don't have authority to make decisions regarding the treaty, so I'll have to leave that to the count. The only promises I can make are personal ones.

“Your Highness, would a promise from me ease your fears about the treaty?” Mitsuha asked.

“Huh? What...do you mean?” Remia responded dubiously.

Mitsuha grinned. “I’m talking about a promise that if you’re ever in trouble, and justice is on your side, I will gather my friends and come to your aid. This has nothing to do with our respective kingdoms, so think of it as a personal promise from Mitsuha Yamano, entirely separate from my position as a

viscountess.”

“Wha...”

“If anyone threatens your position, be it invaders from another country, the demon king’s army, a band of rebels, or someone trying to force you into a marriage you don’t want, I’ll crush them underfoot.”

“Whaaaaaaaa...”

Remia was flabbergasted. This was not the kind of promise a noble typically made to a foreign princess. And she and her ministers probably knew that Mitsuha was not simply some noble girl, but a princess from another land who had appeared out of nowhere, that the divine soldiers who fought off the empire were her own private volunteer army...

Now that Mitsuha thought about it, it was highly unlikely that a neighboring country like Dalisson hadn’t undertaken an extensive investigation of the imperial invasion. Spies, bribery, honey traps—they had any number of methods at their disposal to obtain information from within the royal palace. And anyone who was in the capital at the time would’ve been able to tell at a glance that the mercenaries weren’t the kingdom’s own soldiers. They had strange clothes and equipment, but most of all, they didn’t even speak the local language.

And now I’m here explaining and demonstrating the weapons we obtained from the enemy thanks to the “Goddess’s protection.” Anyone in this room who still thinks I’m just a normal noble girl should resign their post immediately.

It wasn’t hard for those in the know to see the implications of Viscountess Yamano—who was more or less singlehandedly responsible for repelling the imperial army and the ancient dragons—offering Remia her personal support. Mitsuha hadn’t exactly been subtle in threatening anyone who tried to rebel

against the princess or marry her off to their son. Remia may have been taken aback, but some of the other attendees looked aghast. This was bad news for anyone with devious intentions.

“What? Viscountess Yamano, you can’t just make promises like that without telling me first...” Count Kolbmane muttered, looking troubled. “The delegation will lose its authority if I don’t say something... There’s nothing for it. As the official representative of our king, I pay tribute to Princess Remia, the legitimate proxy of the king of Dalisson, by promising to prioritize her kingdom when deploying the equipment we develop, so long as our countries maintain the amicable relations we have long enjoyed as neighbors...and so long as Princess Remia remains free in her position to represent the kingdom.”

Whoa, that was vicious!

Count Kolbmane’s statement was a death knell for anyone plotting to bring down Princess Remia by elevating the young prince and using him to control the kingdom. As he was the rightful heir, Remia *would* likely step aside and give the prince the throne if and when he grew to be worthy of it, and a new agreement could be made at that time. But if anyone tried to force Remia out and turn the prince into a puppet, there would be hell to pay. No one with Dalisson’s best interests at heart could think of betraying Remia now.

Any rebels who put Princess Remia in danger would do so at the risk that I appear out of nowhere inside the royal palace with my divine soldiers in tow. And no one would be able to accuse our kingdom of interfering with Dalisson’s domestic affairs, either—I’d be acting as the Lightning Archpriestess, apostle of the Goddess, sent to protect the king’s legitimate proxy and uphold justice. The rebels would automatically be enemies of the gods—“evil,” in other words. No one could hope to seize power after making an enemy of me.

Dalisson's leaders probably had at least some idea of Mitsuha's status and abilities as the Lightning Archpriestess. Plenty of witnesses had seen the divine soldiers appear and disappear. Even if she didn't end up taking forceful measures to ensure Remia remained on the throne, the moment any rebellion succeeded, Dalisson would lose its privilege of receiving the new weapons and equipment before anyone else, and even worse, it would be seen as an unstable country with a puppet regime, and therefore unfit for the alliance. Anyone who tried to undermine the princess would be treated as a traitor and suspected of conspiring with another country.

This should stabilize Remia's position for a while, at least until the prince grew up, became able to make decisions for himself, and demonstrated that he was pure of character.

Mitsuha glanced over at Count Kolbmane and saw that he was smiling. *Hell yeah! Mission complete!*

"Princess Remia, would you like to be my friend?"

Whoa! Sabine has joined the fray! Just when I thought she'd faded into the background so successfully, turns out she was only waiting for her turn! She called her "Princess Remia" instead of "Your Highness" because they're both princesses. Remia's status is still a little higher, but guess that's fine if they're gonna be friends.

Remia had initially looked puzzled at Mitsuha and Count Kolbmane's extremely generous offers, but her expression quickly turned grateful when she picked up on their intention. It was Sabine's cherry on top that caused her to break out in a broad smile, however. As a royal of a neighboring kingdom, Remia had to know how much Sabine's family fawned on her and how advantageous this friendship could be.

“With pleasure! But how about instead of my friend, you become my little sister?” Remia asked. She had a little brother but no sisters.

Sabine shook her head. “I already have a lot of older sisters. I want more friends!”

Remia responded with a wry laugh. *She probably would’ve been excited about gaining something like a little sister... But Sabine already has two older sisters plus me, so it makes sense she’d rather Princess Remia be a friend! Colette’s the only friend she has, and they’re about as far apart in social position as you can get.*

I might have to put a radio in Princess Remia’s room, too. I did promise I would come running whenever she was in trouble...

The meeting ended not long afterward. There were no treaties or papers to sign at present, so the delegation spent the rest of the time chatting and answering questions from Remia, her ministers, and the rest of the attendees. They politely dodged any requests and carefully avoided making any commitments. Count Kolbmane was especially insistent on blocking anything related to Mitsuha.

I would’ve been okay with telling them a little about myself, at least. What kind of men I like, how collecting gold coins is my hobby... They might even have been willing to help!

That night the royal palace threw a welcome party for the delegation. Mitsuha was crowded by nobles, high-ranking military officers, and wealthy merchants seeking to make a connection or weasel information out of her, which turned it into a stressful few hours.

They want me to dance? Every Japanese kid has to learn the “Oklahoma Mixer” in school, but somehow I don’t think that’s what they’re expecting of me here. Hmm, guess this is why Count Bozes was so insistent I learn ballroom dancing...

Well, whatever. I’m more of a behind-the-scenes kinda gal. Unfortunately going backstage isn’t an option this time, and being a wallflower is off the table, what with this long line of people in front of me. They’ve accepted that I’m not gonna dance, but that’s just made them think I’m free to talk... Whoops...

Across the room, Sabine was dancing with a shrewd little cutie-pie.

She can really dance... And I guess cute younger boys are her type... Oh, he’s just a stand-in for her little brother, Prince Leuhen. She’s not interested in boys yet. Got it.

Colette was watching Sabine enviously.

No, Colette, you can’t dance either! One of us, one of us! Don’t ever leave me!!

Mitsuha had naturally assumed the party would just be the one night, but much to her surprise, it lasted for three full days. Once it was finally over, Mitsuha, who was beyond exhausted, Colette, who ate so much over the three days that her belly bulged, and Sabine, who seemed weirdly happy and energetic, piled into the *Good Ship Lollipop* and departed Mathrica, the first stop on their journey.

Well, not exactly—we rode with the delegation until we were far enough from the capital, and then I jumped to my house to retrieve the Lollipop.

Huh? Am I calling it the Good Ship Lollipop because there are three lolis riding in it? Sh-Shut up! That has nothing to do with anything! I just gave it a name

because I felt bad just calling it “the RV” all the time!

Chapter 36

The Attack

Arrgghh, damn it! I'm soooo frustrated!

Mitsuha had jumped the *Lollipop* ahead to make it look like it had always been there, just like last time, though Count Kolbmane and the others took her to task for leaving it out where anyone could have stolen it. She had decided to travel alongside the delegation this time, but now she was beyond fed up with how slowly she had to drive.

I decided to stay behind the carriages because if we went on ahead, I'd constantly have to be looking back to make sure we weren't leaving them in the dust, which sounds exhausting. I didn't want to subject the horses to the Lollipop's exhaust fumes, either. But the spark plugs are gonna be shot from driving this slow! Actually, I'll probably lose my mind first...

Mitsuha wasn't doing it for her health, though—something had occurred to her that made her decide to stay with the delegation, and when she shared her concern with Count Kolbmane, it turned out he was thinking the same thing. So, nothing for it, she would have to stay with the delegation for another two or three days.

After a while of inching along the road, Mitsuha tried something new: she parked the *Lollipop* on the side of the road so she could relax with Sabine and Colette, waiting until the last carriage was almost out of sight before hustling to catch up. Repeating this process seemed to help reduce her stress level.

That is, it worked until Sabine and Colette got bored and went back to start

Wyvern Quest 3! Stop ignoring meeeee!!

Two days after leaving Mathrica, the event Mitsuha had been waiting for finally came to pass. Not that she was happy to be right.

It was a bandit attack. As the delegation was circumnavigating the foot of a mountain, the brigands appeared suddenly at a bend in the road where visibility was particularly limited. There were about twenty-five of them, and they had set up a carriage sideways across the road to prevent anyone from simply plowing through.

It had been a little while since Mitsuha last stopped at the side of the road, so they weren't far behind the delegation, and it didn't take long to catch up. As soon as they did, another fourteen or fifteen bandits appeared behind them, hemming them in. The bandits had no need to block the road behind with a carriage as well—there was no space for the delegation to turn around, and the bandits wouldn't have given them the chance anyway. The steep mountain was to the right, and the ground to the left was too rocky and uneven for a carriage to move at high speed. Escape was impossible.

Slowly, warily, the suspicious bandits approached.

“Mitsuha, there's no such thing as a bandit that *isn't* suspicious,” Colette said.

That's not what I meant. I mean they're suspicious as bandits. Everything about them is off. They're wearing ragged clothing like you'd expect, but they're clean shaven, they're all wearing matching leather boots, and their swords are properly maintained. They're approaching without any kind of formation, but they're unconsciously walking in lockstep. And there are about forty of them, which is precisely the size of a platoon in Dalisson's army.

“Ahh...” Mitsuha and Sabine sighed together, comprehension dawning. Colette still didn’t seem to understand what was going on.

Mitsuha flipped one of the micro switches she had attached to the *Lollipop’s* gear shift, which turned on a microphone connected to a pair of external speakers.

“Ah, ah, ah. Stop right there, you suspicious bandits! You’ve been warned!”

She then made a quick series of jumps to equip herself and the girls.

The bandits ignored Mitsuha’s warning, however, and continued to advance toward the delegation.

All right. The “bandits” are approaching a foreign delegation even after I tried to warn them off. According to this world’s rules, this is legitimate self-defense.

“Let’s do this. Colette and I will handle the bandits up ahead. Sabine, you take care of the ones behind us. Try your best to incapacitate them, not kill them. And don’t let anyone escape if you can help it,” Mitsuha instructed.

“Okay!” Colette said.

“On it!” replied Sabine.

They’re so confident! How the hell are they both so much better with guns than me?!

The guards escorting the delegation—both mounted and on foot—were trying to block the bandits up ahead, but there weren’t nearly enough of them. If those had been real bandits, they would’ve decided the raid wasn’t worth it and fled the moment they realized they were facing a detachment of real soldiers. The guards were smart enough to realize this, too, and they wore brave faces as they prepared to engage what were clearly fake bandits.

Mitsuha positioned the *Lollipop* diagonally across the road so they could shoot at the bandits out of the windows on both sides without hitting the carriages or guards.

Mitsuha fired first.

Bang!

“Gaaaaah!”

She’d hit one of them in the thigh, just as she intended. She was resting the barrel of her gun on the window frame, which made aiming a breeze. The bandits froze, but their commander—that is, the “bandit chief”—urged his men on.

“It takes a while to prepare that weapon for another attack! If we close the gap during that time, she’ll only be able to use it once, maybe twice more before we reach her! And her aim will waver with the panic! Chaaa—”

Bang!

“—arrrggghhh!”

Colette fired the second bullet. *Yep, it’s common sense to aim for the person giving commands. Good job!*

“Now’s our chance! Forward!”

Whoa, he’s giving commands even after getting shot in the leg. That’s some admirable determination! Too bad it’s pointless.

Bang!

The third bullet missed, but the bandits were clearly shaken.

“So they have two weapons. This changes nothing! Charge!”

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Grah!”

“Aghh!”

“Huh...?”

Mitsuha and Colette increased their rate of fire, incapacitating more of the bandits. The chief fell silent, overwhelmed by this unexpected turn.

Mitsuha switched her gun to fully automatic.

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da!

“GAAAAAAAH!” A scream rose from the entire “bandit” troop.

You didn't think I would use the old-fashioned and heavily flawed M1 Garand in actual combat, did you? I chose this because it's smaller and lighter than an M1 Garand, making it easier for Sabine and Colette to use. Plus, it has a 30-round magazine.

The gun Mitsuha had selected was an M4 carbine. It had less recoil than the M1 Garand because it used smaller 5.56 mm bullets, but the force of impact was almost the same because of the higher initial velocity. It might not be effective against ogres and the like, but it was more than sufficient for bandits in leather armor.

Mitsuha swept the gun at the bandits' feet, but everyone present knew she'd done so on purpose, and realized that she could wipe them out if she so desired. She switched the microphone on again.

“Throw down your weapons, put your hands in the air, and approach the carriages slowly. I'll shoot anyone who attempts to flee or shows the first sign of resistance. You will be arrested and handed over to Princess Remia, who

will have you beheaded as bandits who attacked a foreign delegation once you've been identified. Your corpses will be displayed in a public square and your friends and families will be arrested and investigated on suspicion of conspiring with your villainy.

“Anyone discovered to be a member of the military will be branded a traitor and a rebel, and their entire family will be hanged! However, if you are just a soldier following the orders of an officer, that officer will of course take full responsibility and you will likely be released without charge. Any attempt to run or resist will be treated as a confession that you willingly took part in this assault. You will be seen as a traitor and a coward who fled before the enemy, earning you the contempt of friend and foe alike.”

The bandits froze. The chief—or rather, the commander pretending to be a bandit chief—had ceased shouting, and simply lay still where he had fallen. All was silent behind the *Lollipop* as well—Sabine had been firing at the bandits in that direction, and they could hear the speakers just as clearly.

A bandit at the rear of the group began inching slowly backward so that no one would notice, then suddenly sprinted off.

Bang!

Mitsuha's shot caught him in the right shoulder with such force that he somersaulted once before coming to rest face down on the ground.

Silence.

Then, a moment later, there came a cacophony of steel on steel as the bandits threw down their swords and spears, put their hands in the air, and slowly approached the delegation.

“Prepare to arrest them!” Mitsuha called, and the guards hurried to the

carriages to grab rope and anything else they could use to bind the captives.

“Your Highness, we need your help!”

“H-Huh? Viscountess Yamano?”

Remia and her attendants were startled at Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette’s sudden appearance.

No, of course we didn’t just jump right into the conference room. I got Count Kolbmane’s permission to go back to the capital, drove the Lollipop out of sight, took it back to my house, then jumped near the capital with the girls and we walked from there. The gatekeeper recognized us, and guided us to the royal palace after I told him the delegation had been attacked and I needed to report to Princess Remia right away.

“Bandits attacked the delegation! It’s a disaster! We request that you deploy a force to arrest them as soon as possible!”

That wasn’t a lie. The attack was a disaster...for the bandits.

A clamor filled the conference room as everyone started talking at once. A foreign delegation being attacked within their borders was a huge problem, even if it was by bandits. Dalisson could still find themselves on the wrong end of an international incident, and they had a lot to lose if the delegation was wiped out before they could return home and inform their king of the promise they made. Worst-case scenario, it could even lead to war.

“Prepare the First Company of the Royal Guard for emergency departure!” Remia commanded. “I will go personally!”

No one objected. Given the long and amicable relationship between the two countries, it was unlikely this incident would give rise to war, but it wasn’t

impossible. At the least, this incident could worsen their relationship or lead the delegation to alter their agreement such that it was less favorable for Dalisson. They needed to display maximum good faith in this situation, and the princess riding personally to the rescue would help immensely.

“Where did the attack occur?!” Remia asked.

“Oh, about two days from here by carriage,” Mitsuha replied.

“Huh? But that’s...” Remia trailed off, at a loss for words. The others in the room just stared.

Oh right, we left the city two days ago. If we got attacked two days from here, that means the attack occurred today. It shouldn’t be possible for us to have returned yet.

Remia glared reproachfully at Mitsuha and the girls.

Me and my big mouth. How can I explain this... Mitsuha racked her brain, but struggled to come up with anything.

“...It’s two days’ travel from here,” Colette confirmed, backing Mitsuha up.

“That’s right, two days’ travel,” Sabine added.

The conference room descended into a tense silence.

“...I see,” Remia said eventually, sounding like she had given up on getting a real answer. “Ready supplies so that two of the platoons can protect the delegation before returning to the capital, and the other two can hunt down the bandits. We need carriages for escort and sufficient medical supplies. The dignity and honor of our kingdom ride on this, I will not tolerate any negligence! We will depart as soon as preparations are complete. Get to work!”

Remia’s attendants dashed out of the room. The intensity on their faces

showed that they knew exactly what was at stake.

She had said immediate departure, but this level of civilization was not capable of the speed of a modern rapid reaction force. While two days down the road might have been considered a short distance, it would take at least a few hours to prepare supplies and gather the medical personnel. In which case...

This is a good opportunity, Mitsuha thought. “Your Highness, I have something I would like to discuss with you. Would it be possible to go to your chambers?”

It didn't promise to be anything good, but hoping to save some face for her country and avoid negative repercussions from this incident, Remia nodded darkly and guided Mitsuha and the girls to her room.

Thirty minutes later, Remia's orders had reached all pertinent parties. Everyone worked as fast as they could to notify those who were to accompany the princess on the journey and prepare the necessary supplies. In the end, preparations took over three hours.

Can't blame them for taking that long. This was sudden, and while the two platoons that are to escort the delegation will be returning right away, the other two platoons don't know how many days or weeks their mission to capture the bandits will take. Besides, readying a horse and carriage takes a lot more effort than filling a truck with gas and turning the key.

This is also a military expedition led by the king's proxy herself. Well, Princess Remia will probably return with the platoons that are going to turn around immediately, but officially, this will be an expeditionary force led personally by

the princess to save the delegation and eliminate the bandits. It'll be a great chance for Dalisson to demonstrate its sincerity.

And because the princess is coming, her personal entourage is coming as well, and they're even bringing a carriage with a canopy bed. It's actually pretty impressive that they were able to get all that done in just over three hours.

The carriages, cavalry, and foot soldiers journeyed toward the site where the delegation had been attacked. The soldiers came from the First Company of the Royal Guard, an elite force that was absolutely loyal to the royal family and the kingdom. It was made up of four platoons of forty soldiers each, plus the company command and a few dozen support staff—just over two hundred people in all. They were well aware of the gravity of the situation and what was expected of them, and their expressions were stern, as were those of the transport and support squad members following behind.

Mitsuha and the girls were riding with Remia, in an amply-cushioned carriage that spared no luxury. Remia's maids, who would ordinarily have ridden with her, had been moved to a different carriage, leaving the four young women alone together.

"So, is everyone we discussed accounted for?" Mitsuha asked.

"Yes. Those who oppose me, who support me, those I'm unsure about, members of the neutral faction..."

Okay, everything's in place, Mitsuha thought. "Then we'll proceed as planned. We have a lot of time to kill until we arrive, care to play a game?"

"A game?" Remia repeated.

Mitsuha pulled a pack of cards out of her bag.

We call cards “trump” in Japanese, but I’ve always said “cards.” It sounds cool and foreign to my Japanese brain. I introduced them as “cards” to Sabine and Colette for that reason, and that’s how they’ll be known once I popularize them here! Unfortunately, this world lacks the technology to produce sheets of paper that are tough and uniform enough to use for playing cards, so it’ll be a while before I can actually produce and sell them.

Accordingly, the deck of cards Mitsuha pulled out of her bag was made in Japan, the kind that look like they’re made of paper but are actually PET. PVC used to be more commonly used, but companies were switching to PET because it was better for the environment. Mitsuha didn’t want to bring pollutants into this world, either.

“...Now for the real thing.”

After explaining the rules and playing a few open-hand practice rounds, it was time for their first proper game of poker.

“I’ll raise you three!”

“Fold.”

“Call.”

“Call.”

“Let’s see your cards!”

“I have a... What do you call this again? Oh yeah, a straight!”

“Aw man...”

“Hahaha...”

Remia was having the time of her life. This was partially due to the game itself, but mostly it was because she was getting to immerse herself in a fun experience without having to worry about her position or the things she said. She'd probably never had an opportunity to hang out with other girls on equal footing in all her life. Sabine knew exactly how Remia felt, and was equally invested in the game. Colette played just as hard, too, though without any such thoughts.

I knew Sabine would be a natural, but I had no idea Colette would be so good at the high-level mental warfare that is the game of poker... Me? I'm getting frikkin' creamed, damn it!

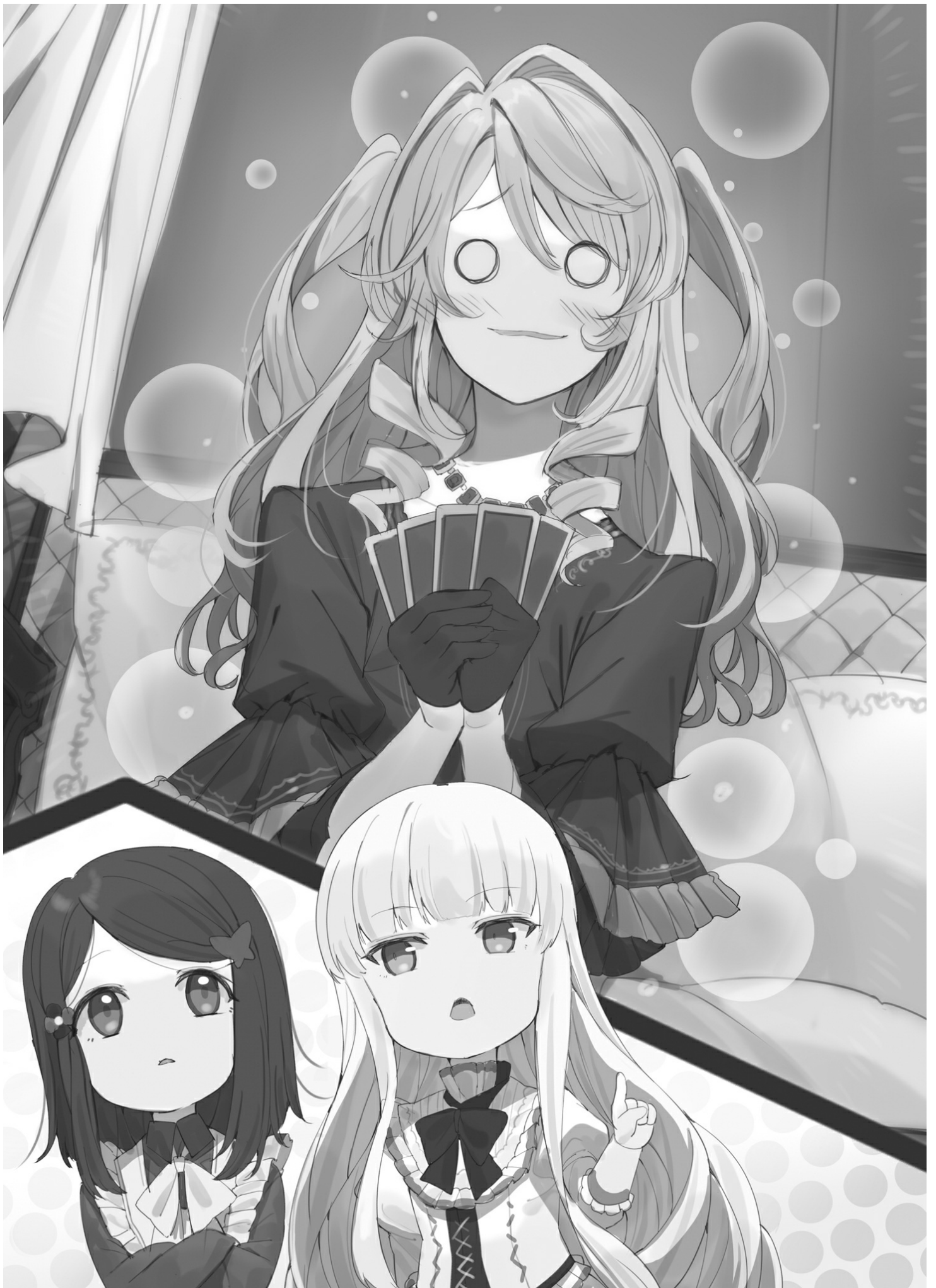
...I've made a grave error.

Princess Remia had gotten completely and utterly hooked on poker. And she was *good*. She'd learned the rules shockingly fast, and already won all the Japanese sweets Mitsuha had brought along for the two-day journey.

"You need to do something, Mitsuha..." Sabine muttered, looking genuinely distressed.

"I know, I know. I'll find a chance to jump back and get more next time we stop to rest!" Re-upping their candy supply was of the utmost importance.

"That's not what I'm talking about! Well, we need sweets, too, but...look!" Sabine pointed surreptitiously.



“Eeehee. Eeeheeheehee. Hooohoo!” Remia’s cackle sounded more than half mad.

I think we’ve broken the princess. She was more starved for fun than I thought... Or is it just getting to spend time with people as equals that has her so giddy?

How can I fix this...

“Kakakakakeheheh!”

...Is there even any human left in there?

Two days later.

“Straight!” Sabine cried confidently as she revealed her hand.

“Pair...” Colette sighed, throwing her cards down in frustration.

“Get flushed!” Mitsuha shouted excitedly, revealing a flush. *That’s, uh, what I say when I get a flush. I regret nothing! Anyway, a flush is when you have five cards of the same suit. It beats a straight, even though it seems like it should be easier to get. This means I win!*

Mitsuha’s exultation was short-lived, however.

“Full house!”

Are you kidding meeeeeee?!

“Hyuk hyuk hyuk!” Remia’s victorious laughter filled the carriage.

...What kind of laugh is that?! She’s creeping me out!

Numerous carriages came into view, pulled to the side of the road up ahead.

They had finally reached the site of the bandit attack.

“We’ve arrived!” a mounted outrider called back.

“Bring us up beside Count Kolbmane’s carriage!” Remia commanded, her expression and voice snapping back into princess mode in the blink of an eye.

Eek, how’d she do that?!

Mitsuha and the girls had ended up spending the full two days with Remia in place of her maids and ladies-in-waiting. Remia definitely had a fun time, but as for the others, well, it was certainly...interesting. Mitsuha thought the princess had been totally broken, but she returned to normal the moment they arrived... or so it seemed, anyway.

After the carriages were parked, the girls waited for the guards—both those on horseback and the ones who had been riding in carriages—to secure the area before stepping out. As befit their lower status, Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette left the carriage first to make sure it was safe, followed by Princess Remia. The ministers, influential nobles, and military bigwigs who had come along gathered around her.

“Where are the members of the delegation?” Remia shouted.

“Over here, Your Highness!” Count Kolbmane emerged from the most lavish of the delegation’s carriages.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re safe, Count Kolbmane! I am pleased beyond words to see you unhurt after this terrible ordeal.”

Remia showed sympathy, but she did not apologize. That was very important—this incident was the work of bandits, who belonged to no nation and didn’t pay taxes. They could very well have come over the border from elsewhere. An apology would have been tantamount to an admission that

Dalisson was responsible for the incident, and could come back to haunt them politically. She needed to maintain the stance that this was an unfortunate incident to which her kingdom had no connection.

“Where are the wounded? And in which direction did the bandits flee?!” Remia pressed.

Count Kolbmane grinned. “We suffered no casualties nor material harm. We crushed the bandits and took them all prisoner.” He turned to the guards waiting behind him. “Bring them here!” Three bandits were brought forth.

The people standing around Remia gasped and turned pale. All it took was a glance to tell who these bandits were. Their clothes were worn, but while their beards had grown a little in the last two days, they had clearly been clean shaven at the time of the attack, and their hair was perfectly trimmed. They also had matching swords and boots, the former of which had been left on their belts when they were tied up instead of being confiscated. They probably thought that simply changing their clothes would be enough to fool some frightened foreigners, and that they could get away with using the expensive weapons and boots they were most comfortable with after years of use. But to any of Dalisson’s courtiers or military personnel, it was obvious who they were: Dalissonian soldiers.

“We will take these prisoners back to our kingdom and torture them until they tell us everything they know. This we will share with your kingdom—please use the information to eradicate the bandits once and for all,” Count Kolbmane said.

While his words seemed to make everyone from Dalisson uncomfortable, a few were especially agitated.

“E-Everyone knows you can’t trust a bandit’s word! We should execute them

right now!” one of the ministers cried suddenly.

“I agree! We don’t want them escaping and returning to their murderous ways! We’d be doing the world a service!” one of the military officers shouted. He and a few of his colleagues went to draw their swords, but the delegation’s guards moved to block their way. It was a natural reaction—the prisoners were positioned behind Count Kolbmane, which meant that the Dalissonian officers were drawing their swords at the leader of the delegation.

“Cease this at once!” Remia commanded in a sharp voice. A multitude of glaring eyes turned toward the officers, and they stepped back reluctantly. “How could you be so foolish as to bare your steel in the direction of these foreign dignitaries?! As the captors, it is their right to decide what to do with the prisoners. Why should their treatment of the bandits concern you, anyway? Are you trying to ruin our kingdom’s reputation?! Or are you afraid of what these bandits might have to confess?”

Those who had insisted they kill the prisoners trembled in the face of Remia’s scathing words.

“By the way, *Commander...*” Remia began, addressing the leader of the Capital Army’s Fourth Battalion.

“Yes, Your Highness?” he responded dubiously.

“Why do these bandits wear swords and boots supplied by our military?”

“Um... Urk...” Beads of sweat formed on the commander’s brow.

The captain of the Fourth Battalion’s Third Company cut in, answering in his superior’s stead. “Perhaps they’re substandard products that the supplier deemed unfit for military use and sold on the open market instead...?”

Remia glared at him, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Oho, interesting. So

you're saying all three of these bandits just *happened* to buy identical swords and boots from the same supplier? That's quite a coincidence. In that case, the rest of the bandits probably purchased theirs from the same supplier as well. This workshop certainly makes a lot of faulty products. I wonder how they stay in business."

"Hrn..." The Third Company captain had no response.

"You don't suppose these men actually belong to our military, do you?" the princess asked.

"O-Out of the question!" the commander of the Fourth Battalion responded in a rush.

"In that case, I take it you have no objection to these men and their families being punished as bandits and co-conspirators? You're absolutely sure these aren't our soldiers?"

"Of course, Your Highness! There are no such men in the Fourth Battalion!" the commander insisted vehemently, his face turning red.

Remia grinned a nasty grin. "Oh? That was not my question. I asked if they are our soldiers, and you answered by saying they are not in *your* battalion. To my ears, it sounds as if you just confessed that any men acting as bandits in the military could *only* belong to the Fourth Battalion."

"Huh...?"

"You're also implying that you know every one of the hundreds of soldiers in your battalion, and can say for certain these men don't belong to it. And that we should investigate them *and* their families for the crime of banditry."

"Th-That's right!"

Mitsuha called out to someone behind Count Kolbmane: "Come on out!"

At her command, a bandit got out of the count's own carriage, from which the count himself had only recently emerged.

"...You hear that, Lieutenant?" Mitsuha asked, before turning to the assembled dignitaries. "May I present the commander of the Second Platoon, Third Company, Fourth Battalion of the Dalissonian Capital Army!"

The entire contingent from Dalisson, save only Princess Remia, gaped wordlessly in shock. The platoon commander glared at his superior officers—and at one of the ministers—with undisguised anger and contempt.

We said we'd taken prisoners, but we never said there were only three of them.

The minister and commanders had probably thought the platoon commander, who knew the particulars of the mission, was dead, and that they could get out of this by insisting that the captured men were just bandits *claiming* to be soldiers in an attempt to save their own necks. Who would believe a bandit over a high-ranking military officer? It would also have been simplicity itself to kill the men on the way back to Mathrica, claiming they had been cut down trying to escape or had developed sudden and mysterious "stomach pains."

Remia had brought along a company from the Royal Guard rather than the Capital Army, so it was unlikely any of them would recognize rank-and-file soldiers from the Fourth Battalion. The conspirators could have cut up the men's faces, smashed them into rocks, or set their carriage on fire to make their corpses unidentifiable. And yet, their urge to silence them before they could speak was so great that they had tried to kill them on the spot, before the delegation's guards interfered.

"Don't you remember me, sirs? I'm Lieutenant Noitson of the Second Platoon.

You told me Lord Mounholtz, the minister of military affairs, had given us special orders to attack the foreign delegation, take custody of the third princess, the delegation leader, and the Lightning Archpriestess, and seize the secret weapons. That was just a few short days ago, can you really have forgotten...?” The platoon commander’s mouth was twisted into an approximation of a grin, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

Man, that look is terrifying...

“Seize them!” Remia shouted. Upon her order, the minister of military affairs, the Fourth Battalion commander, and the captain of the Third Company were all taken into custody.

Soldiers of the Capital Army might have hesitated to obey such a command; there was no way of knowing how many among their number were loyal to the minister. That was why Remia had brought a company from the Royal Guard—they swore total fealty to the royal family, making her orders absolute. They had no qualms about arresting a government official or high-ranking military commander.

The three captives struggled and hollered, so Remia ordered that they be gagged.

“Listen, everyone!” Remia said, turning toward the high officials and members of the Royal Guard. “We have arrested traitors who plotted a rebellion and tried to grind our national dignity into the dirt by attacking a foreign delegation. I assure you they will receive fit punishment. Further, we will root out their co-conspirators and punish them appropriately as well. If I am killed before that has been fully accomplished, I order you to behead all who have been captured up to that point, as well as their families, households, and everyone associated

with their faction, and then to wipe out the rest of the traitors to a man. Once that is done, Lord Wembley, the minister of finance, is to become my brother's guardian and manage the kingdom until he comes of age. Have I made myself clear?"

Brutal, but fair, Mitsuha thought. Those are the kinds of precautions she has to take to avoid assassination.

The Dalissonians stared at Remia with fear and awe in their eyes, but made no attempt to argue.

Under the laws of Dalisson, punishments for most crimes did not extend to the criminal's family. Treason was another story, however, because a greater level of deterrence was necessary. If anyone argued that killing a traitor's entire family was excessive, you could just respond by saying, "Why should that matter to you? Are you planning on committing treason?"

It was unlikely a traitor's entire family would actually be executed as long as Remia was alive and well, but if she were killed, the traitors truly would be sentencing their families to death. The extinction of their bloodline was a fate worse than death for anyone who prized their family name and lineage. It was the best way to prevent anyone from attempting to usurp the throne or overthrow the government.

"That said, I don't intend to be killed so easily. Also, on this occasion alone, I shall forgive those who were acting against their will on orders from a superior officer. From now on, however, military regulations will be revised such that any who participate in treasonous activities will be punished accordingly, whether they were following orders or no. If you receive orders that are clearly abnormal, confirm them with a higher officer. Any orders that run counter to the kingdom's best interests should be considered null and void."

Remia focused her attention on the officials who had accompanied her.

“I assume you have already realized this, but I chose an equal number of people who support me, who are neutral, whose allegiances fall into a gray area, and who openly oppose me to come along on his expedition. I did that partially to prevent those with ill intentions from making a move in my absence, but also because if I had apprehended them in the capital, their allies in the military might have taken action.

“When we return to Mathrica, we’re going to keep it a secret that we arrested these men, then quickly capture the other key figures in the rebel force. I charge them with committing treason by attacking a foreign delegation and trying to drive our kingdom to the brink of destruction, and with rebelling against the royal family. I also suspect they could be in league with a foreign power.

“We will begin the return journey tomorrow morning. Until then, question the prisoners about their sympathizers and the nature of their schemes. Oh, and take them out of sight and gag them so as not to make our foreign guests uncomfortable.”

...Geez, Remia is wicked.

If she hadn’t done anything, the minister of military affairs and his co-conspirators would probably have just avoided any more open acts of rebellion and worked in secret to steadily increase their power by winning over the prince and the military. Remia used this incident to brand them all as traitors and make a clean sweep. Without this opportunity, she never would’ve been able to arrest them—she might be a princess, but that doesn’t mean she can just detain or dispose of influential people without reason or proof.

Nobles and politicians can hardly afford to play nice, and that goes double for

the king's proxy. Remia was far from just a beautiful figurehead of a princess. She saw through her enemies' intentions and countered impressively, using her political adroitness to turn a national crisis into an opportunity to purge the rebels. She even had the charisma to shamelessly use the delegation to benefit herself while still gaining their trust and cooperation. Remia's supporters, the neutral parties, the moderates who valued stability above all else, even those with questionable loyalties and the opportunists waiting to see how things shook out all had to be thinking the same thing: We must not go against Princess Remia! She will bring prosperity to this kingdom!

That's exactly why she brought along an equal number of people from each faction. She used this chance to strengthen the loyalty of her subjects, which will save her from the effort of having to win people over when she returns to the capital. This was the plan we came up with during our secret meeting in her bedroom.

"I am sure you are all tired from the hurried journey, so we will camp here tonight. Please rest until dinner has been prepared. I must meet with the members of the delegation, so I leave you in charge, Lord Wembley," Remia said to the minister of finance. Then she turned and headed back to her own carriage, leading Mitsuha by the hand.

Hey, you just want to play more poker! You can't call that a meeting! You didn't even invite the leader of the delegation!

A little while later, an eerie laugh could be heard coming from Remia's carriage.

"Hyuk hyuk hyuk!"

Remia's maids and ladies-in-waiting, who normally would have been serving the princess in her carriage but instead had been crammed into uncomfortable carriages full of filthy men, listened with miserable expressions.

The next morning, after a simple breakfast, the bandits—or rather, the soldiers who had carried out the attack—were loaded into the carriages that had been intended to carry casualties and survivors from the delegation. They were followed by the minister of military affairs and his fellows, and with that, the Dalissonians were ready to hit the road.

And the delegation is good to go as well!

“Until we meet again, Your Highness! Take care of yourself!” Mitsuha said.

“...Huh?” Remia responded, looking puzzled. “Aren't you all returning to Mathrica?”

“What?” Mitsuha didn't understand.

“What?” This was Remia, now.

“Huh?!” they exclaimed in unison.

“No, our business here is done,” Mitsuha explained. “We're moving on to the next country on our itinerary...?”

“Whaaaaaat?!” Remia stood stock still, paralyzed with shock.

“I mean, we don't have any reason to go back. We suffered no injuries or damage to our carriages, the traitors were all arrested, and there were plenty of witnesses. You don't need us.”

“Grk...” Remia looked anguished.

I know you just want to play cards on the way home, damn it!

“Anyway, you need to get started on cleaning out the rebels, right?” Mitsuha said. “I’d think the presence of a foreign delegation would only cause problems.”

“Urgh...”

There’s no reason for the delegation to go back to Mathrica, and she has to see that. She probably just doesn’t want to admit it to herself. Well, it’s not like I don’t understand how she feels.

Fine...

“Your Highness, follow me...”

Mitsuha beckoned Remia toward the princess’s carriage, and they piled into it along with Sabine and Colette.

A few minutes later, a terrifying voice resounded from within.

“Hyuk hyuk hyuk!”

A short while later, the delegation and the expeditionary force from Dalisson were preparing to go their separate ways. Mitsuha was going to ride in Count Kolbmane’s carriage for a bit, but it was unlikely they would be attacked again, so she would switch to the *Lollipop* when they took their next break. She planned on camping in the RV tonight, so the delegation would be able to call her if something happened.

Wait a second... It wouldn’t make sense for the Lollipop to be up ahead. I made it look like we drove it back to Mathrica, and then we rode here with Princess Remia. The Lollipop should still be in Mathrica. The integrity of my story is crumbling... What do I do?!

“...Sorry, but can I please ride with you back to the capital, Your Highness?” Mitsuha asked, dejected.

Remia’s satisfied smile spread from ear to ear. “Hyuk hyuk hyuk!”

The faces of the maids and ladies-in-waiting who had been about to climb into Remia’s carriage, however, stiffened in despair.

Can’t blame them... They were probably looking forward to spending a few uninterrupted days attending the princess, and now because of us they’re gonna have to spend the whole miserable trip exposed to the leering gazes of a bunch of dirty men...

Oh, I know!

“Your Highness, let’s let them ride with us!” Mitsuha suggested.

“Huh? But...” Princess Remia, who had wanted to spend the entire trip playing games, was clearly unhappy at the idea. In the face of this disapproval, her attendants tensed up even more.

But Mitsuha had something up her sleeve.

“I’m going to send you a pack of cards and a couple of board games from my domain to show my appreciation for all you’ve done for us. If we teach your maids and ladies-in-waiting how to play on the way home, you’ll be able to play with them even after—”

“I command you all to ride in my carriage on the way back! What are you waiting for?! Go and get your things!”

Yup, worked like a charm. This’ll be a nice break for Princess Remia until I’m able to fulfill my promise. She has a brutal job ahead of her, and spending a couple of days having fun will help her get through it. Being a princess isn’t easy.

Mitsuha looked over at Sabine, who appeared carefree as ever.

Hmm, or maybe not... Guess everybody's different, even princesses.

They camped one night on the way back and arrived in Mathrica before sunset the following day. Remia ended up losing about half the candy she had won from Mitsuha and the girls on the outbound journey. She told her attendants in no uncertain terms that she'd be angry if they lost on purpose, so they played for keeps. They understood her temperament better than anyone, and knew it was the right choice.

Remia's maids and ladies-in-waiting were all smart—no fool would be chosen to serve a princess. Even the maids were daughters of high-ranking nobles, and all possessed great talent and an advanced education in addition to their social standing. Every one of them could be trusted to protect Remia in an emergency and help her escape to a friendly country if need be.

Besides, intelligence wasn't the only factor that determined how good one was at these games. Guts, bluffing, a willingness to play dirty, and luck were important, too. And Remia's attendants had her beat in some of those areas.

"Grrrrrr..."

She's getting frustrated, but winning every time wouldn't be any fun. She should be glad to be blessed with so many worthy opponents.

Remia's mood improved as soon as Mitsuha pointed this out.

"Yes, you're right..."

I knew she'd catch on quick.

Once they reached the royal palace, the prisoners were covertly transferred

to the dungeon, and the lieutenant who had led the platoon of “bandits” was brought to an isolated room to be kept out of sight until the rebels had all been rooted out. They didn’t want to tip off anyone who had known about the attack. Next, Remia moved to quickly round up the conspirators whose names they had “gotten” out of the prisoners on the way back. Knowing it wouldn’t take people long to notice that the minister of military affairs and two military commanders were nowhere to be seen, she quickly and secretly summoned the Royal Guard and any officers she could trust implicitly, explained the situation to them, and arrested all the remaining conspirators in one fell swoop.

Without their leaders, the rest of the conspirators were helpless. Remia arrested all the rebel officers’ soldiers who knowingly took part; some may have simply been following orders they couldn’t refuse, but she could sort that out later. What was important for now was to take all potentially dangerous elements out of circulation.

In the end, not all that many people were arrested. The leaders may have wanted to keep their faction small in order to keep more of the spoils for themselves. And these “rebels” didn’t necessarily want to kill Remia or stage an armed uprising. That would turn the nobility, the military, and the majority of the kingdom’s citizens against them, making it unlikely they could hold onto power even if they succeeded. Recruiting enough people to join their rebellion would’ve been a near impossibility, anyway.

They probably just wanted to weaken Remia’s authority and curry favor with the young prince so they could control him after he assumed the throne upon his father’s death. If the king died now, however, the eminently capable Princess Remia would be chosen as regent, limiting what they could do. So they staged the attack to strike a blow against Remia’s reputation, learn how to make the new weapons for themselves, and get ahold of Princess Sabine and

the Lightning Archpriestess.

Once the platoon obtained the new weapons and secured the prisoners, soldiers loyal to the minister of military affairs would have killed the “bandits” to silence them and rescue the delegation, making it look like they had saved Sabine and Mitsuha. The minister would then claim that the new weapons were missing while secretly mass-producing them in his own territory. The guns wouldn’t have been so simple to replicate, but he had no way of knowing that.

Remia would never have been able to arrest him if he had stayed in the shadows—she needed to catch him in an open act of rebellion, with ample evidence and eyewitnesses to prove his guilt, and this incident had provided the perfect opportunity. Not only was the attack against the delegation part of a treasonous plot, it was essentially a declaration of war against a friendly power. The minister of military affairs couldn’t talk his way out of this one.

Seriously though, this incident would have been a political disaster for Dalisson under any other circumstances. They would have been deeply indebted to our kingdom. They’re super fortunate that part of the delegation’s goal from the beginning was to strengthen the princess’s position, and that Count Kolbmane placed more importance on strengthening our countries’ relationship than on his own ambition. Heck, I played a pretty big role in it, too. Talk about lucky!

Remia had no further urgent matters to attend to once she finished giving out orders to arrest the rebels. There was no need to rush the investigation.

There’s no point in us sticking around. I’m just gonna check Princess Remia’s room, her balcony, and her roof, then say goodbye...

“Come now, no need to leave so soon!” Remia said when Mitsuha informed her of her plans.

Eh, it is already getting dark, Mitsuha conceded. She doesn't know about the Lollipop, so it makes sense she'd try to stop us from leaving. I don't feel great about driving on unpaved roads in the middle of the night anyway, so might as well accept her hospitality.

Remia didn't ask to play games that night. She must have been tired from the four-day trip, and she knew it wouldn't be a good look to have fun while her people were busy racing around the city late into the night arresting the rebels. She kept things relatively serious at dinner, and turned in early. She had a busy day of listening to reports and whatnot ahead of her.

“All right, time for us to take our leave,” Mitsuha said after breakfast the next morning. *I really do mean it this time.*

“Come now, no need to leave so soon!”

Damn it! She won't let me go!

“Stay at least a few more days. I have some matters I want to discuss with you... Hyuk hyuk hyuk!”

That's the most obvious lie I've ever heard!

And indeed, Mitsuha and the girls departed in the *Lollipop* a few hours later. The delegation was already way ahead of them because of the two days it took to get back to Mathrica, so it would be a little while before they caught up. It had been no easy task to escape Remia's *extremely* strong request that they stay a few more days.

Why should we have to stay and deal with the aftermath of this pathetic little failed rebellion?! A member of her government attacked us as part of his plot! It's crazy asking us to help with that!

Left with no other choice, Mitsuha turned to her last resort.

"I'm counting on you, Sabine!"

"I won't let you down, Mitsuha!" Sabine replied.

There's no surer hand I could have played.

"Okay, the winner of this game of reversi will decide whether we leave right away or stay a few more days. Begin!"

They had played nothing but cards on the way to the site of the attack. Mitsuha introduced shogi and reversi on the way back, but they could only play those when they stopped for a break—even Remia's luxurious carriage shook too much for board games. And shogi took too long to play on a short break, so Mitsuha had only brought it out when they camped for the night. Even then, they were all exhausted from being shaken around in the carriage all day, so they only got as far as learning the rules.

Reversi was a snap to learn, however, and short enough that they could fit a whole match into a short break, so they had played a decent amount of it. Sabine declined to participate, though; she was a pro at both shogi and reversi, and would have ruined the beginners' fun, so she held back. That left Remia, one of the court ladies, and one of the maids to dominate everyone else in the carriage, including Mitsuha and Colette.

So Remia had the impression that Mitsuha and Colette were easy marks, and Sabine simply didn't like reversi. She had agreed to the match immediately when Mitsuha said that the loser would have to do as the winner says, and was

surprised when Mitsuha chose Sabine to represent them in such an important moment.

By the time the match was over, her face was as white as the board in front of her.

“I feel kind of bad for Princess Remia...” Sabine said as they made their way down the highway.

Says the girl who broke her spirit... But that's the cold and unforgiving nature of competition. I'm sure it was a good lesson for Princess Remia to learn. Never to take Sabine lightly, I mean.

The girls caught up with the rest of the delegation around noon. Mitsuha was driving around twenty-five miles an hour, while the delegation could cover fifty at best in the course of an entire day thanks to the luggage-laden carriages that accompanied them, which could only go a hair faster than a farmer's wagon. They also had to take frequent breaks, unlike Mitsuha and the girls.

They're actually making good progress, all things considered.

When the *Lollipop* caught up to them, the delegation had pulled off the road for lunch, and they invited Mitsuha and the girls to join them. It had been six and a half days since the delegation left Mathrica. They shared some food the relief squad had packed, but aside from some vegetables and tubers that kept well, they were almost out of perishables. That meant it was time for jerky and other dried foods. Sabine and Colette grimaced, but they didn't complain. That much they had learned from lunch with the merchants.

The delegation would normally have stayed in towns overnight or stopped in villages to procure food, but they had done neither to try to make up for the

two and a half days they had lost. Even just stopping in a village to buy food would take a significant amount of time given the need to negotiate with villagers and make sure the goods were in order. A sales war could very well break out among the villagers as they tried to attract the delegation and make some easy money by hiking their prices or trying to push inferior products on them, knowing they were foreigners who would never come back to complain. The village mayor might even show up and complicate matters. So the delegation was better off skipping small villages and only visiting larger towns.

“Viscountess Yamano, how would you like to travel with us for the rest of the journey?”

While they ate, both Count Kolbmane and Clarge invited Mitsuha to rejoin the delegation, but if she did that, she would no longer be able to do as she pleased. It would be too much of a constraint sticking with them in town and not being able to world-jump when she wanted to. It was obvious they just wanted more opportunities to get something out of her, anyway.

“The *Lollipop* will break down if I drive too slowly. Imagine how irritated and unruly a horse would get if you made it walk a tenth its normal speed for days on end. It’s the same thing,” Mitsuha told them.

I don’t actually know if that’s true about horses, they might actually be thrilled by the chance to take it easy for a few days! Seems like Count Kolbmane and Clarge got the point, though, loath as they are to let me go.

Admittedly, driving slowly probably wouldn’t have all that much of an effect on the RV. There’s a much more important reason I can’t travel with the delegation—I’d lose my mind! Forget the horse, I’d be the irritable and unruly one! Seriously, who could stand to drive five miles an hour all day?! There’s no way in hell I’m putting up with that! And think of all the time I’d waste! It’d be

way more constructive spending that time exploring foreign towns and hanging out with Sabine and Colette. I need time to take care of business in my domain and back on Earth, too.

I can't go months without visiting my house. My neighbors and the neighborhood police officer would worry about me, and someone might file a missing person's report. I have to go back every now and then to show everyone I'm doing fine.

Count Kolbmane and Clarge were persistent, but Mitsuha was eventually able to talk them down and make her escape. The count didn't even try to make the argument that Mitsuha and the girls would be safer with the delegation; he could hardly do so after they were the ones who saved everyone from the fake bandits. His pride as a man and a noble wouldn't allow him to ask them to stay in order to protect the delegation, either.

Afterward, they made arrangements to meet up in the next country on their itinerary. Mitsuha asked when they were planning on reaching the capital, broadly speaking, and promised to contact them on the radio a few days before that. If she had trouble reaching them, she would leave a message with the royal palace instead. The palace had power to spare thanks to the solar panels, and they had someone monitoring the radio all day long. It wouldn't be a surprise if there was someone monitoring it all night, as well.

I'm not gonna contact them at night unless there's a major emergency, though... Which is exactly what they're preparing for, I guess. Carry on, then!

Once they were done discussing business, Count Kolbmane, Clarge, and many others struck up small talk with Mitsuha as a pretext to try to get information out of her or offer her various deals and proposals. Each attempted to obstruct the others as they tried to get Mitsuha to accept their overtures, and while they

carried themselves with unfailing politesse, their ulterior motives were all too apparent. The whole ordeal was exhausting.

Some of the proposals were actually quite advantageous for Yamano County, but most of those were made only to gain Mitsuha's favor, without an eye to profit. Deals like that would be revoked the moment Mitsuha was gone or the other party no longer benefited from the connection. She wanted nothing to do with people who cozied up to her while she was prospering but would turn their backs when she needed them most.

The proposals that genuinely benefited both parties were worth considering, however, and she told all those people that she would get back to them about it later. They wouldn't be able to move forward with anything until the delegation returned home, anyway.

Everyone other than Count Kolbmane and Clarge, who figured they would get another chance to ride in the same carriage as Mitsuha just as they did when they left Mathrica, was extremely persistent in their efforts to approach her. It wasn't every day you got a chance to speak to the Lightning Archpriestess and Princess Sabine. Count Kolbmane was visibly displeased with their behavior, but he couldn't complain—they were all simply working for the benefits of their families, same as he was.

But that's got nothing to do with us!

After finishing their decidedly unappetizing meal, Mitsuha and the girls departed without taking time to rest and digest.

Like I'd be able to relax around these people anyway!

"All hands on deck! The *Good Ship Lollipop* departs now!"

Chapter 37

W2W2

Mitsuha, Sabine, and Colette arrived at the capital of the next country on their itinerary.

Did that feel too fast? That's only because I skipped ahead. We stayed in a few rural towns, but they're all the same, no point in getting into the details. We're not gonna get kidnapped by little-girl snatchers or harassed by delinquents everywhere we go. The only people we really need to be careful of are kidnappers, and they're not too likely to risk targeting a group of three—too much chance of a loud struggle. A kidnapper would only target a girl by herself, which is why I won't let Sabine and Colette out of my sight.

Anyway, we reached Saquon, the capital city of Coursos, country number two. That's all you need to know.

When the city came into view in the distance, Mitsuha jumped to empty the sewage tank and remaining drinking water as per the usual, then left the *Lollipop* at her house in Japan and jumped the three of them to Wolf Fang's base. She wanted to take care of her business on Earth while they were a good distance ahead of the delegation, and there was no way she was going to leave Sabine and Colette behind. It was a little dangerous taking them to Earth, but far less so than leaving them in the other world on their own.

"We're heeere!" The three girls announced in unison.

"So you are..." As always, the captain was a little thrown off by their sudden appearance.

I'm teaching Sabine and Colette English as well as Japanese. I realized that only being able to speak Japanese would be a real hindrance if they ever had to take up residence on Earth... Took me long enough to realize that! There might be times they had to rely on the captain, and even if they lived in Japan, only speaking Japanese when they look so obviously Western would come with its own share of problems. I know some people in that situation, and they complain about it all the time...

The girls have already learned a fair amount of Japanese for the sake of watching their precious DVDs, so they might as well keep at it. I'll just have to teach them both languages. Sorry for the workload, girls. They're both fast learners, though, and can already speak some broken English. I guess it was a good call giving them all those Disney DVDs...? But I had to work my ass off in English class, damn it!

Mitsuha had come to the mercenary base this time to hold a meeting with representatives from Earth's countries. It had been a while.

Very few of the representatives would actually be the leaders of their respective countries—most would be boots-on-the-ground officials. Really it was more of an informal get-together, an unofficial event with the goal of exchanging information and coming to a mutual understanding. Any promises made would be binding, but no one was going to be signing any treaties.

"Is everything ready?" Mitsuha asked.

"Yep. The attendees're already at the hotel in town. Nothing suspicious so far, but I hired another mercenary group we're friendly with to help with security just in case. Even if some country decides to send their special forces, we shouldn't have any problem repelling the attack," the captain said confidently.

Who would be foolish enough to attack a hotel full of dignitaries from all over

the world, anyway? Even if it was me they were after, they'd have a hell of a hard time catching me. Like trying to catch an eel barehanded on your first try... or something?

The meeting was the next day. Which meant...

“Let’s go get some sweets at the café!”

“Yaaay!”

That night, Mitsuha and the girls had terrible tummy trouble.

We all ate too much! Again! When will we ever learn?!

“All right, it’s time to begin the Second World-to-World Round Table—W2W2 for short!”

Mitsuha’s declaration was met with a round of applause.

I know they’re just being polite, but it still feels good!

Unlike the last meeting, which had been held on short notice, it seemed like most of the attendees this time around were diplomats and high-level ministers. The captain had drawn up a list for Mitsuha, and she’d made sure to go over it before the meeting.

There’s a representative here from Japan. A certain country that wanted someone sympathetic to their stance must have leaked the invitation. I have to be careful they don’t find out I’m Japanese.

“We’ll start with the rite of tribute,” Mitsuha continued, once again conning the countries into giving her gifts. The representatives seemed to have learned their lesson from last time, as most brought practical items instead of jewels and other riches. *I wouldn’t mind getting jewels, actually—I can sell them for*

good money, which is plenty practical.

Her first few gifts included a prefabricated boat and a solar panel system. *They're on the right track, but I already have those... Well, I might be able to find a use for them.* She also received a treadle sewing machine and a piano, and much, much more. *The piano's nice, but no one would be able to tune it, let alone play it...* The Japanese representative gave her a set that included a Japanese sword, kimono, and traditional doll. *Seems like they're assuming the traditional Japanese aesthetic will go over in the other world as well. And you know what? They're probably not wrong. The sword especially.*

Given the gifts she received, Mitsuha felt she might've been better off with jewels after all, which she could sell to buy what she actually needed. The countries would've found out immediately if she sold them on Earth, though, and selling them in the other world and converting the gold coins would be too much hassle. Plus, losing three-fourths of the gold to the exchange rate would be infuriating.

Choosing a winner wasn't easy, but after much thought Mitsuha went with a small country that had reproduced a full set of tools like those used by ancient shipwrights.

This country gets it! They remembered what I said last time, considered what I would want the most, then took the time to reproduce historical tools using modern metallurgical techniques. I can use these as a reference to mass-produce more tools in the other world. What an awesome gift!

In return, Mitsuha gave them some plants that were used as medicinal herbs and an eight-inch statue made out of an extremely heavy metal. It would be a huge discovery if it turned out to be a new type of metal, but they would have to wait for the results of the analysis. She also gave them a mating pair of

horned rabbits and a ticket to visit the other world (in case the plant and statue both turned out to be duds).

Naturally, Mitsuha had the representative sign a contract stating that if a new discovery were made the country could use it to produce and sell products, but she would retain the ultimate rights. She wasn't about to let anyone have a monopoly or fleece the rest of the world.

The prizes—er, items I chose to give in return are a little more extravagant than last time. The other countries' representatives' eyes are bulging out of their heads! Well, try harder next time, fellas. If there is a next time.

Anyway, now for the main event.

“As stated in the letter of invitation, any recording devices including cameras and voice recorders are prohibited,” Mitsuha said. “Anyone caught breaking this rule will be removed immediately and their country will receive none of the benefits decided upon in the course of this little tête-à-tête. Understood? Did any of you forget? If so, I'll call it an ‘accident’ and let it pass, so long as you give them up now.”

No one reacted. Anyone brazen enough to have brought a hidden recording device wouldn't be troubled by such a warning.

But...

After a brief silence, several small objects appeared in midair and clattered onto the table.

Mitsuha had jumped while summoning all the recording devices in the room, then returned, placing them a little ahead of their original positions. The representatives who had brought miniature cameras and sound recorders went pale upon seeing their devices land on the table in front of them. There were all

kinds of devices, some made to look like a button, a tie clip, or a cufflink, even one wired inside of a pair of glasses.

These look fun. I'm gonna take them for myself!



“You’re all out of here. Escort them to the parking lot!” Mitsuha commanded.

The mercenaries stepped forward and removed the rulebreakers. Some left quietly, while others struggled as hard as they could to remain...pointless as it was. Mitsuha wasn’t going to start the meeting until they had been removed.

“I thought you’d realized by now the futility of trying to fool me...” Mitsuha said disappointedly.

The conference room had gone silent. Everyone was probably imagining the punishment those people would receive when they returned home with nothing to show for their efforts. *There’s no way I can let anyone record this, though. It would be a problem if pictures of me or clips of my voice made it out of this room.*

Mitsuha knew there was nothing she could do about facial composites or portraits drawn from memory, but she doubted that would be an issue—it was unlikely any country had sent a sketch artist in place of a diplomat. Someone might have taken a surreptitious photograph of her in town, but that wasn’t a reason for concern either. A picture of a seemingly ordinary girl walking the streets wouldn’t be newsworthy, and if anyone used it to ask around and try to find her, it wouldn’t be long before someone called the police.

The countries thought Mitsuha was from another world anyway, and she had made it clear that if anyone obtained and distributed pictures or voice recordings of her, she would treat it as an act of extreme hostility and respond accordingly. No one would be foolish enough to test her on that.

I don’t think what I just did will prevent pictures entirely. It was just another demonstration of what happens when people break their promises to me. I’m

hoping that'll be enough to prevent any pictures of me from going any farther than their intelligence divisions.

"Let's begin. Does anyone have any questions before we get down to business?" Mitsuha asked. A number of representatives put up their hands, and she pointed at one.

"Um... Who are they?" the representative asked.

Whoops, I forgot to introduce the people sitting on either side of me.

"This is Sabine and this is Colette. They're my bodyguards," Mitsuha replied.

"Bodyguards?!" the representatives exclaimed in shock. That was clearly not what they had expected her to say about two preteen girls.

I'm not gonna just open my big mouth and tell them that one's a princess and the other's an important vassal of mine. That'd be the same as painting big ol' targets on their backs. I need these people to think that I'm the only person of value here, and that there would be no point in kidnapping them.

"That's right," Mitsuha said. "They'll use their magic to stop the heart of anyone who harms me. Please don't make any sudden movements or reach into your pockets in my vicinity—they may overreact in their desire to protect me. I don't want a rumor starting that anyone who comes near me dies of a heart attack."

Everyone in the room recoiled in horror.

Well, this way no one'll lay a finger on Sabine and Colette, even when I'm not around. No one would be dumb enough to take my bodyguards hostage in a bid to get at me. Especially not bodyguards who could magic them dead in an instant. Now if they go after anyone, it'll be me.

Okay, time to start the meeting for real.

Mitsuha hadn't really planned on holding another meeting, but the persistence of the various nations left her little choice. For her part, they had been easy enough to ignore, since the only way they had to contact her was via Wolf Fang, but they were driving the mercenaries up the wall. The captain said his guys were so busy answering phone calls and emails that they couldn't get any work done, and he begged her to do something about it. This meeting was her solution.

"I decided to hold this little get-together because you all have been requesting to see me. What is it that you want? Oh, but first, all further attempts to reach me should be sent to my new email address. It seems you were hindering these gentlemen's work. From now on, any countries that call or write to the mercenary base will be ignored and removed from my list of contacts," Mitsuha warned.

Sweet, my goal for this meeting is accomplished.

Mitsuha had actually gotten requests from a lot of different countries to talk, and granted some of them by meeting with a few countries at a time. Meeting with just one country would be risky because they could unilaterally bury her in an avalanche of requests, so she always chose multiple countries with opposing interests. She held the meetings at the base or in the nearby town, and hired the mercenaries for security. Meeting a country on their home turf or in a location of their choosing would've been beyond careless.

The meetings always went according to plan—the representatives would step on each other's toes with their demands, and Mitsuha would escape without making any promises. They were exhausting, though, and a waste of time, so she stopped after the first few. Problem was, the other countries found out and

demanded they get a turn, too. So she wanted to use this meeting to make sure no one troubled the mercenaries any further, and to resolve any lingering business all in one go, but the representatives had other ideas.

“It would be an honor to invite you to our country!”

“Would you be willing to meet with our leader?”

“Please, allow us to welcome you as a state guest...”

Visiting a country as an official guest of the state was the last thing Mitsuha wanted. That would involve attending official ceremonies, and it wouldn't be long before pictures taken by the mass media were disseminated throughout the world. Her desire to avoid that was the whole reason she was holding this unofficial meeting and had been so thorough in confiscating the recording devices.

Word of the mercenaries' heroic battle in the other world and the dragon remains they brought back had spread across the globe, but the knowledge that a princess from the other world had visited Earth was still a secret known only to the leaders of each country, and Mitsuha wanted it to stay that way. It wouldn't be such a big deal if she became known as Nanoha, a noble from another world, but once people found out she was a Japanese citizen named Mitsuha Yamano, she would have to leave Japan behind. The only escape from being hounded by the media and the government about the other world would be to abandon her house, her friends, and her neighbors, and set herself up in another country.

In fact, Mitsuha had a feeling that day wasn't too far off. Information always got out, and even if it didn't, she only had about ten or fifteen years before people started to think it was weird how little she had aged. Before that happened, she'd have to tell people she was moving abroad for work and

vacate the house.

My friends will all be married with kids by then. They'll fall out of contact with their friends from middle and high school and forget all about them. Their circle will shift to college friends and the other moms in their neighborhood... Oh, damn it, I'm crying...

"Wh-What's wrong, Your Highness?!" a representative asked.

"Do you feel all right?!" asked another.

What am I doing? I let myself get all sentimental and weepy...

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just recalling a sad memory," she replied, managing to play it off and move on.

The representatives competing to invite her to their countries looked around awkwardly. They probably thought she was recalling something from her homeland.

"Anyway, I don't want too many people knowing about me. Then I wouldn't be free to go around and enjoy myself. I'm fond of visiting different cities as a regular person. If I became too famous to walk around freely, there wouldn't be any point in coming to this world anymore."

"D-Don't worry, Lady Nanoha! We will of course keep your existence a secret!"

The representatives were panicked, afraid of missing out on the massive benefits they—quite rightly—thought they could gain from their relationship with her. She now felt there was a pretty good chance they would keep her secret. Otherwise they would lose out completely.

They covered a variety of topics thereafter, but Mitsuha made no promises and signed no treaties. She had explained last time that she lacked the authority to make diplomatic decisions on behalf of her country and had refused to act as a mediator or taxi to the other world, so the Earth representatives probably couldn't think of much to ask her for. Many of them requested mineral, plant, and animal samples, but that was the biggest trump card she held, and she couldn't play it so easily.

Virtually everyone invited Mitsuha to visit their country, but she wasn't *that* naive. It would be like walking into a bear's den wearing a vest made of steaks. And she *definitely* wasn't taking Sabine and Colette anywhere like that.

Mitsuha was about to wrap up the meeting when a representative from a certain Asian country addressed her.

"Your Highness, is there no way I can convince you to visit our country?"

"I thought I made my blanket refusal clear," Mitsuha replied. *How many times will I have to say no before they all get the message?*

"I knew it! You *are* from my country! That means you have a duty to obey our government's commands!" he shouted.

...Oh, give me a break. This guy probably calls up drinks companies to complain that the water isn't wet enough.

"Hanh? What are you...?"

The other representatives looked just as exasperated as Mitsuha, but the representative in question didn't seem to mind.

"Your hair color, eye color, and skin color are precisely those of someone from my country! Not to mention that I asked that question in my native language, and you accidentally responded in kind! That's definitive proof!"

Mitsuha sighed. “What do you think of his claim?”

“It’s laughable. He’s wasting our time.”

“Huh?” The pain in the ass stared in shock; Mitsuha had spoken with a Middle Eastern representative in their native language as well.

“What do you all think?”

“I think you may be better off not inviting that country next time.”

This exchange had been with an African representative in *their* native language.

“Wha...”

“As you can see, I have a translation spell that allows me to speak with anyone in their native language. And my world has people of many different races, just like this one. There are people who look like me, people who look like my bodyguards, and Black people as well,” Mitsuha said.

I don’t actually know if there are Asiatic or Black people in the other world. I haven’t seen any yet, but there might be some on the other side of the continent or on another continent altogether. I’ll ask Sabine later.

“A translation spell?!” came the mingled cry.

Well, that sure got their attention. I thought some of them had already noticed I can speak the language of any country, but apparently a lot of people hadn’t. Spells aside, we can’t be more than a few years away from simultaneous translation devices small enough to put in your pocket...

Arrrrggghhh! Give me back those six years I spent hitting myself over the head with an English textbook!

Mitsuha needed a moment to collect herself.

Anyway, a translation spell shouldn't be that surprising. There are already instant offline translators small enough to wear.

Huh? The Japanese representative looks pale. I wonder if he was thinking of saying the same thing? Good thing for him that other guy went first. I doubt Japan'll ever approach me about it now. How lucky was that!

I have a blog in Japanese, but I only call myself "Viscountess Yamano" there. Here I'm only "Nanoha," so I doubt anyone will make the connection. I've never mentioned my domain in these meetings, and my blog readers think I'm just playing make-believe... Except for the four people I invited to the other world, that is.

After finally coming to a good stopping place, Mitsuha brought the meeting to a close. She would've felt bad if the representatives had left empty-handed after coming all that way, though, so she gave everyone a sample of this one plant she had been unable to identify from a field guide. The countries wouldn't feel compelled to come back if she didn't give them a little something. And if she didn't pique their interest in attending the meetings, they were that much less likely to follow her ground rules.

Sorry if this plant exists on Earth, too! If it does, I'll make up for it!

Mitsuha didn't give the pain in the ass a plant sample. She wasn't going to invite his country next time, either. He went deathly pale when he heard this; he was likely to lose his job when he returned home and gave his report.

I'll pray that's all he loses.

And so W2W2 came to an end with very little gain for anyone.

That night, three young girls appeared at a hotel in the town near Wolf Fang's base.

...No, we're not wearing leotards, and we don't have calling cards with a cat on them. This isn't CAT'S♥EYE!

The girls knocked lightly on the door of one of the rooms, and it opened just wide enough for them to slip through before closing again. Naturally, there were Wolf Fang mercenaries stationed outside the door, at both ends of the hallway, and in front of the elevator.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Please, don't apologize! Thank you so much for choosing us!"

And so Mitsuha began a secret meeting with the representative of a certain country.

Mitsuha repeated the process many more times that night, holding top secret meetings with different representatives in different rooms. And...

"Sweet, I'll be able to get citizenship in a bunch of different countries! And I'll be treated as an honorary citizen who doesn't have to pay taxes or serve in the military! The first step toward preparing safehouses in case I ever need to flee is hereby complete!"

A few countries also said they would elevate her to the peerage since she was a princess in her home country and a local lord in her new one. Mitsuha knew how powerful such rank was in countries with a class system, so she accepted without hesitation. Her plan of setting up refuges in a mix of small and large countries, including the one where Wolf Fang's base was located, was going smoothly. She planned on creating a number of bases in the other world as

well, in case of war or civil unrest.

Mitsuha had decided that if Sabine ever needed to flee the kingdom, it would be better for her to go to another country in that world rather than to Earth—hence the plan to create bases there. It didn't seem like that was going to happen anytime soon, and hopefully the need would never arise at all, but it was best to have as many options as possible.

After the last secret meeting, Mitsuha and the girls parted ways with the Wolf Fang mercenaries and jumped back to Japan. The representatives were still in the nearby town, and there were surely spies disguised as attendants and others who had entered the country separately, so Mitsuha's house would be safer and more comfortable than Wolf Fang's base.

It was a little late for a group of three children to eat out, so Mitsuha took the girls to a convenience store. She didn't jump right to the store because someone could have seen them, and they were still wearing the clothes they'd put on for the secret meetings. She didn't want to have to explain their outfits to any acquaintances she might run into. *Hell, the convenience store employees know me pretty well themselves, so...*

"Sorry for boring you guys with my personal business all day. Get whatever you want to make up for it," Mitsuha said.

"Yaaay!"

"Oh, but you can only get one ice cream each!"

"What?! No fair!"

Mitsuha had finally learned her lesson.

“...H-How much longer are you gonna be in there, Sabine?” Mitsuha asked.

“Don’t rush me!” the princess snapped.

“Mitsuha, can I go before you?” begged Colette. “I can’t wait any longer...!”

“Oh, come on!”

Mitsuha had thought that limiting the amount of ice cream they could buy would prevent another night of suffering, but after binging on enough snacks, sweets, and juice for ten, the result was pretty much the same. And to make matters worse, unlike the department store, the hotel, or Wolf Fang’s base, Mitsuha’s house only had one bathroom.

“At least this way I won’t gain any weight...” Sabine muttered to herself inside the bathroom.

“Just hurry it up! I’m about to explode out here!!” Mitsuha shouted.

Chapter 38

Cursos

Mitsuha and the girls grabbed their luggage and jumped back to the other world, leaving the *Lollipop* behind in Japan. They could see Saquon, the capital of the kingdom of Cursos, in the distance.

Last time, Mitsuha had jumped to Earth shortly after the city came into view because there was a good chance someone would spot the *Lollipop* if they got any closer. If they switched to going by foot too soon, though, they would have a hard time making it to the city. That was what had happened with that town in the last kingdom. She had to perfectly calibrate the distance such that the *Lollipop* wouldn't be seen *and* the walk wouldn't be arduous.

If ever there was a time to show off my elite problem-solving skills, it's now!

"Mitsuha, how much longer is this going to take..." Sabine whined.

"We're almost there..."

...I misjudged the distance. Again.

Mitsuha and Sabine were exhausted. Colette, superhuman feral child that she was, was the only one not struggling. "Mitsuha, since we don't have the *Lollipop* anymore, can't you just jump us somewhere within sight where there aren't any people around?" she asked, sounding confused.

"Ah...!" Mitsuha and Sabine exclaimed together.

Mitsuha had told the two of them that her world-jumping placed absolutely no burden on her body, and that she had only ever said it did to save herself from political pressure. There was no way the girls would've let her jump around willy-nilly otherwise. She also told them a little about the particulars of her world-jumping ability, including that she could jump anywhere she had been or seen before. She'd done it plenty of times during this trip to avoid other carriages, *Lollipop* and all.

"Why, Mitsuha, why?!" Sabine cried.

"Sorry, it never occurred to me..."

The previous evening, after their stomachs were done with the Royal Rumble, Mitsuha and the girls had eventually taken a nice bath and gotten a good night's sleep. So today, feeling refreshed, they finally arrived at Saquon, capital of Coursos.

Well, it doesn't feel quite right to say we arrived today when we'd already been in sight of the city before I jumped us to Earth, but whatever! We'd been way ahead of the delegation at that point, but the time we spent on Earth should have allowed them to close the gap a fair amount.

Damn it, that reminds me! I need to call them!

"Change of plans! We're going to Yamano County for a few!" Mitsuha announced.

"Seriously?!"

Mitsuha jumped to Yamano County with the girls, and this time it was the four-year-old Leah who spotted them first. *No, she's five now. I keep forgetting*

that.

“W—! W-W-Welcome back, my lady!” Leah managed a proper greeting once she calmed down from the initial shock, then scurried off to tell everyone of Mitsuha’s arrival. *She’s sooo precious...*

While the maids hurried to make tea, Mitsuha went to her office with the girls, changed the radio’s frequency to the one she used for the royal palace, and pushed the PTT switch.

“Checkmate King One, Checkmate King One, this is White Rook, over.”

The person waiting by the radio in the royal palace raced off to summon the king. When he arrived, Mitsuha informed him they had arrived in the capital of Coursos, and left a message to be passed on to the delegation. She would have to come back tomorrow to confirm their estimated time of arrival.

After she was done, Mitsuha let Sabine speak to her father for a bit. No matter how together Sabine was for her age, she was still a ten-year-old girl.

“Father, I’ve formed a close friendship with Princess Remia. As per our contract, that gives me ten points. I’m spending those to reject the ‘study friend’ and ‘playmate’ we discussed. I have no interest in spending time with that duke’s spoiled son or that marquis’s selfish daughter!”

...I don’t know what just happened, but that was scary!

Later on, Mitsuha put out tea and sweets so that Sabine and Colette could have a social with the Yamano Munchkin Maids. *I say “social,” but they just played like normal kids.* Meanwhile, Mitsuha used the time to meet with Anton, Willem, and Miriam, checking on things in the domain and giving directives for her continued absence.

Mitsuha planned on returning to Saquon after a slightly late lunch at her residence. They still needed to find lodging, and they'd learned last time that there was no guarantee that would go smoothly. Plus, if they waited too long, all the best inns might fill up, and they needed a safe place to stay.

"Right then, let's head back," Mitsuha said.

"O-Okay..." Colette responded reluctantly.

"Sure!" Sabine, on the other hand, seemed unbothered. Their previous visit had been her first time playing with normal friends, but this time she was okay with leaving because she knew she'd be able to see them again. Either that, or she felt at ease because her friendships with these girls were now firmly established.

We're gonna be back tomorrow anyway to check on the delegation. I don't want to jump the Lollipop outside the city every time I have to contact them, and coming here is the only other alternative. Seems like I'm gonna be back a lot more than I thought...

Mitsuha didn't mind jumping in front of her servants, but she decided to return to her room first because she didn't want to startle them unnecessarily. She also needed to lock the door from the inside and set up the security system before she left because absolutely no one was permitted in her room except Sabine and Colette, and then only when they were with her.

"Ready? Here we go!"

"...Are you three unaccompanied by a chaperone? Could you come with me, please?"

Not this again... Another lecture from another gatekeeper...

“Coursos, here we are at last!” Mitsuha yelled energetically.

Yep, that wasn't Sabine or Colette. It was me. What's with these indulgent, not to say tepid, looks I'm getting? Mind your own business, people!

After enduring nearly thirty minutes of questioning and lecturing from the gatekeeper, the master and her servants had finally entered Saquon, capital city of Coursos.

...Sabine being the master, and me the servant. Colette's a servant of a servant, I guess. Anyway, we're in a new capital in a new country! Time to find an inn.

“Do you have a three-person room available?” Mitsuha asked.

Just like last time, she chose a luxurious inn on the main thoroughfare in the center of the city. As an elite establishment and the “face of the country” in a sense, they could be sure an inn like this would at least be clean and free of shady customers.

A handsome fellow who looked to be about twenty greeted them with a smile. “Yes, that’s no problem at all. Will anyone else be joining you?”

Awesome. He's not belittling us because we're children like the guy at the first inn in Mathrica did. This is how the employees of luxurious establishments ought to behave.

Mitsuha couldn't go around putting inns out of business in every city they visited, so she had dressed Sabine in lavish clothing to convey beyond a shadow

of a doubt that she was a lady from the upper echelons of society. Anyone who saw her would assume she was a noble or a wealthy merchant's daughter—that was the kind of high-class aura she projected.

Colette and I could put on the nicest clothes in the world, but there'd be no way to hide the common aura dripping from our every pore.

Once again, Mitsuha refrained from mentioning that Sabine was a princess or that they were part of a foreign delegation. She didn't want special treatment, and she didn't want word of their presence getting out and bringing all kinds of unwanted attention.

"Yes, they'll be arriving in the next few days," Mitsuha replied. "I won't make any reservations for them now because I can't say for sure whether they'll be staying in the same inn, but if there are open rooms when they arrive, I suspect they'll stay here."

I don't like making promises I'm not sure I can keep. It's part of the Yamano family creed, along with "never lend money" and "never serve as the guarantor for a loan." We don't lend money because long ago, when my ancestors operated a prosperous lumber business, they lent money so readily that they angered the manager of a bank who felt they were stepping on his toes. Apparently they signed a non-aggression pact stating that my family wouldn't lend money, and the bank wouldn't sell lumber. I don't know if that's true, though, or just a story my forebears made up to teach their descendants a lesson.

And I hardly think I need to explain the part about the loans.

Anyway, Mitsuha and the girls successfully secured a room for their stay in Saquon.

Every room had a bath, as was to be expected of such a luxurious inn. Unfortunately, it was just a simple bathtub that the employees had to fill with buckets of hot water. There was a drain pipe to empty the tub, at least. The inn strictly prohibited spilling the hot water, and naturally there was no shower or other method of reheating what was in the tub.

...Yeah, let's just bathe at my house.

Mitsuha and the girls took a bath at her house, then returned to the inn for dinner. It was easy to take a long bath when you got in with two other people. *Though I already take long baths when I'm alone. I like to get out and stretch, maybe do a little strength training, then get back in and soak some more. Two hours can really fly by like that, ya know! I lose about four pounds in the process, too.*

The long bath meant that it was already dinner time, even though they had checked in on the early side. It would've been too much trouble to go out and look for a restaurant at this hour, and the inn was sure to have quality food, so they decided to eat in. Price was no object, since Mitsuha could just expense it. She made a note of the cost so she could invoice the king later.

And the meal was just as lavish as she had hoped. Unfortunately, lavish does not always mean delicious. *Don't get me wrong, it's not that it's bad as such. The amount of spices they used shows they definitely aren't cutting corners or cheaping out on ingredients. It's just difficult to enjoy this food when I'm used to contemporary Earth cuisine, which has been laboriously refined over the years. The comparison isn't fair, but still.*

Even Sabine, who had eaten and enjoyed this world's luxurious food all her life, could no longer be satisfied by meals like this after getting used to Earth's

food. Only Colette was still perfectly happy with food from either world—this was significantly higher quality than what she ate in her village, after all, and it might seem blasphemous to complain.

They went to bed right after dinner. Nothing was going to keep them from starting to explore the city the next day.

Mitsuha really had been naive enough to believe that. Shortly before the second bell of the day (around three in the afternoon), she was on standby beside the radio back in Yamano County. She called at precisely the scheduled time, and the king and Count Kolbmane both answered.

Mitsuha and the girls had spent so much time on Earth that the delegation was only a day away from Saquon. It had been a while since they'd left the capital of Dalisson, and the countries in this region weren't very large, so it made sense they were already that close.

We've only spent half a day exploring the capital so far, so we'll just have to enjoy ourselves until they arrive tomorrow evening.

Mitsuha told them the name of the inn they were staying at, then cut the connection. She had spoken with the king for a while the previous day and would be seeing the count in person shortly, so there was no need to spend any more time on the radio.

Afterward, Mitsuha met with her brain trust while Sabine and Colette played with the Yamano Munchkin Maids. *Urgh, I want to play with Leah, too...*

Mitsuha and the girls ate dinner at her residence before returning to Saquon, where they spent the next day exploring and eating street food until the

afternoon. They returned to the inn on the early side in case the delegation arrived before evening, and while they were relaxing in the first-floor lobby, an official from the delegation walked in. He spotted the girls, stopped to bow his head in acknowledgement, and went straight to the reception desk. The clerk saw the exchange and naturally assumed he was the companion they had spoken of.

“I am here with the diplomatic delegation from the Kingdom of Zegleus. I want to reserve some rooms.” *Yeah, Zegleus is the name of our kingdom. Did I forget to mention that before now??*

“Wh... Y-Yes sir, we would be honored to have you. How many will be staying with us? Do you have any requests for your room allocation?” The fellow was thrown off for a moment, but he held it together. He wasn’t manning the desk at a classy establishment for nothing.

But...Count Kolbmane didn’t send anyone ahead this time, did he? He must’ve skipped it because he was planning to stay wherever Sabine was staying. Or did he think we were going to tell the inn about them and take care of the reservations? Whoops, did we blow it?!

The clerk called over the manager and some extra help to handle the large delegation. After that, the checkin process went about the same as last time. Mitsuha figured it would take them a while to settle into their rooms, so they would see one another at dinner.

As per the usual, Mitsuha spent dinner doing her best to fend off overtures from Count Kolbmane, Clarge, and the other members of the delegation. She focused on her food, talked to Sabine and Colette, and managed to eat in peace for the most part.

This is always so exhausting. There has to be some way to get out of it...

“Now then, let us prepare for our meeting tomorrow,” Count Kolbmane announced once they had finished eating. After everyone but the key members of the delegation had left, they discussed their strategy over tea. “The king of Coursos is in good health. There are three princes and four princesses, so he does not want for heirs.”

I can't tell if that's a good thing or a surefire recipe for discord...

“All except for the fourth princess are fully grown, and the crown prince, second prince, and second princess are all children of the queen, so there should be no fear of conflict over the succession,” he continued.

Oh, that's good. They probably won't have any political trouble, then.

“So this should go smoothly if we just play it by the book,” Mitsuha said.

“Yes, this country is more stable than Dalisson,” Count Kolbmane agreed. “There is one small problem, however...”

“Problem?”

“The king is known for his difficult personality. He has no qualms about using underhanded methods to force conditions beneficial to his kingdom onto others.”

“In what way is that problem ‘small’?!”

There's not a chance in hell this is gonna go well...

They spent a while longer discussing strategy. Count Kolbmane had made detailed plans with the king before they left Zegleus regarding what compromises they were willing to make with each country. The king had also given him discretionary power to make decisions in unforeseen circumstances.

True, they could contact the king on the radio if need be, but they could hardly do so during a meeting, and the country they were negotiating with would never believe them if they said they had spoken directly to the king just now. They didn't want to speak too openly about the radio, anyway. In a certain way, the speed at which they could convey information was just as powerful a weapon as the guns.

"So you don't care if the talks break down?" Mitsuha asked.

"That's right. There's no way we'd be able to effectively coordinate with multiple countries if we let anyone think they can bully us into giving them what they want. The treaty won't work if we give one country favorable treatment. Besides, our only mission is to lay the groundwork for the treaty before the official talks take place. It's not our job to win the king's cooperation. If he refuses to listen to us, we'll just leave.

"The king and his advisors aren't fools. Once they realize that forceful methods will not only be ineffective but also bring harm to their country, they'll be ready to talk by the time the next delegation arrives to get the treaty signed."

"I see..."

They decided that if the king came out swinging, they would respond in kind.

"Thank you very much for agreeing to host this meeting."

It was just after noon the next day. The delegation had given their formal greetings to the king in the throne room, and now both parties had moved to a conference room to begin talks. Count Kolbmane opened by explaining the purpose of this delegation's visit and detailing the current situation.

“...As such, we were dispatched to explain the situation in advance of the official treaty talks,” Count Kolbmane finished.

His explanation was met with silence. The king, crown prince, and second prince watched him with sullen expressions. The third prince, who was the son of a concubine and therefore low in the line of succession, watched the proceedings with a cold, indifferent look in his eyes. The other attendees, who included ministers and senior statesmen, waited for the king’s reaction.

“In that case, Coursos will act as mediator for this treaty. And I’ll take that ‘gun’ as well,” the king demanded brazenly, pointing at the case on Mitsuha’s back.

Count Kolbmane made no attempt to hide his frown. He was a wise and experienced noble who knew one should never show their displeasure before a king—which meant he was doing it on purpose.

“Well, there you have it,” the count said. “What do you think, Archpriestess?”

“Out of the question. Let’s remove Coursos from consideration for the alliance and move on to the next country,” Mitsuha replied.

“Right, understood. Thank you very much for this chance to speak with you, Your Majesty. I will arrange for the subsequent delegation to bypass your country so as not to waste any more of your time. We will take our leave now. I pray that you and your people receive the Goddess’s blessing...” Count Kolbmane stood up, and Mitsuha and the rest of the delegation followed suit.

“Huh...?!”

The king and his sons and ministers looked on in bafflement. It was unlikely any of them had actually expected the delegation to accept their terms. Starting with excessive demands and then conceding little by little was nothing more

than a negotiating tactic. The king had assumed the delegation would be well aware of that, never thinking for a second they would react the way they did. And after hearing Count Kolbmane's explanation, even a fool could see that spurning the alliance would be tantamount to suicide.

"W-Wait! What are you doing?!" the king exclaimed, half jumping out of his seat.

Count Kolbmane responded in a level, emotionless voice. "Your demands exceeded what we were willing to accept, so the Archpriestess decided there was no further need for discussion. It would be better to leave now than to take up any more of your precious time."

"Th-This is nonsense! You're supposed to negotiate!" the king fumed.

Count Kolbmane glanced at Mitsuha, tagging her in.

"With all due respect," she said, "these talks are about more than the fate of one country—the gravity of this situation transcends borders and threatens the entire continent. We have no time to waste on lies and bargaining, and we certainly won't allow any selfish behavior or backstabbing. You made your intentions clear with your demands, and we are responding accordingly."

"Wh-What gives this girl the right...?!"

The king must have realized who Mitsuha was the moment Count Kolbmane called her "Archpriestess." Coursos didn't border Zegleus, but the empire's invasion was one of the most dramatic events on the continent in decades. There was no chance word of it hadn't reached this kingdom...though there was the possibility that they knew nothing of Mitsuha beyond the royal palace's official proclamation that she was simply a brave noble girl who inspired the troops.

Regardless of how much they knew about her, the delegation was behaving as if she had authority in this situation. As leader of the delegation and a high-ranking noble, Count Kolbmane had to be careful what he said, but Mitsuha had no such limitations as long as she acted as the Archpriestess rather than a viscountess. And they wanted the king to know that.

“Now you disrespect one of our number by calling her ‘girl,’” Count Kolbmane said. “You clearly have no true intention to negotiate. An insult to our delegation is an insult to king and country—I will remember to tell His Majesty exactly what happened here. Now, let us just say these talks were never meant to be.” He walked toward the door, and the rest of the delegation followed.

“W-Wait! What’s going on here, Count?!” the king cried. “How can you let a little girl with nothing more than some piddling claim to fame speak that way?! You will regret making fools of us...”

“Hnh?” Count Kolbmane stopped and turned, treating the king to a shocked expression. “I believe it was you who tried to make fools of us, Your Majesty. To answer your question, the Archpriestess is the most important figure in this potential alliance. I cannot argue with her decisions.

“There is no need to fear. Being left out of this alliance will have no effect on your kingdom. You will not have to divert any of your budget to update your weaponry, and you will not have to participate in multilateral military exercises. Your lives will continue on as normal.”

The king whimpered and fell silent. No one in his position could be too thick to realize what Count Kolbmane was implying—that Coursos would be stuck with outdated weaponry, surrounded by countries that had joined the alliance.

Coursos had always been aggressive in matters of diplomacy, but not, it seems, because they actually thought of themselves as a strong country. The

king adopted this haughty pose to make up for his kingdom's lack of excellence in any particular area, hoping to prevent other countries from taking advantage of them. He played hardball to eke out what small victories he could.

Be that as it may, the delegation had no reason to give them favorable treatment.

"Please wait!" one of the senior statesmen called out in the tongue-tied king's place. "That's not how negotiations work! Both sides are supposed to give their terms and work together to find a compromise! To reject our demands outright and leave is unheard of!"

That's your angle? Feh, I'll handle this one.

"That's only when both sides are on more or less the same page from the outset," Mitsuha began. "Trying to find a middle ground between your outrageous demands and our reasonable ones is unfair to us. You're behaving like a merchant who sets exorbitant prices for their products and expects people to haggle. Customers who don't like to haggle end up paying the full, ridiculous price. I don't deal with merchants who operate that way. They should sell to everyone at the same reasonable prices.

"I feel the same way about diplomacy. We're not going to negotiate with a country that plots to give itself every possible advantage rather than trying to reach a fair agreement. Why should we agree to terms that are disadvantageous to us? There are plenty of other countries out there ready to negotiate in good faith.

"Anyway, that's where we stand. Find a country that's content to accept your demands and make a pact with them, because it's not going to happen with us."

The delegation finally left the room, leaving the stunned Coursans sitting silently in their wake.

“...Was that too much?” Mitsuha asked.

“No, it was perfect,” Count Kolbmane replied. “They’re not fools. They will surely realize that their usual methods won’t work this time, and change their approach. We were a little rude, but so were they. We are representing His Majesty and our country—we cannot allow anyone to insult us, not even a king. They cannot blame us for our response. Besides, it was the Archpriestess who broke off the talks, not the delegation. This wasn’t *my* fault.”

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Mitsuha pouted. She was joking, of course; they had discussed it all beforehand.

“His Majesty said he didn’t mind if the talks with Coursos broke down. He expected that if we failed to reach an agreement in the preliminary meeting, their king would panic and rush to concede. Passing on the alliance would leave them isolated and doomed to destruction, and they are not foolish enough to oppose us with their limited military strength. Their position would only worsen, until they had no choice but to humble themselves and ask to join the alliance.

“Now, I wonder how long it will take them to change their attitude. Will they dispatch an emergency courier to Zegleus after we depart their borders...?”

I feel a little less sure about this, but what do I know? The king and Count Kolbmane are pros when it comes to international diplomacy. Compared to them, amateur isn’t a strong enough word to describe me. And I can’t apply Earth logic to this. The culture, history, and importance of information are all

fundamentally different in this world. I have to trust the count.

Anyway, our work's done for the day! Now I can go back to exploring the capital with Sabine and Colette!

“Wh-What do we do, Your Majesty...?”

Back in the conference room, the Coursan ministers looked anxiously to the king for guidance. Despite being his most trusted advisors, not a one of them had any suggestion to offer.

“...There's no need to panic. The delegation has already accepted our invitation to this evening's party. They will not go back on their word simply because of how this preliminary meeting went—to do so really would be an insult to our kingdom. We'll work this out somehow!” the king declared.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” his subjects responded. Admiration and relief showed on their faces.

“You fools! *You're* supposed to come up with solutions in situations like this! You serve me, not the other way around!” At this eminently reasonable outburst, the king's ministers hung their heads in shame. “Anyway, I'll overlook it this time. We had only planned on a banquet tonight, but we'll hold a ball afterwards as well. Get together some good-looking lads between twelve and twenty-two from the households of the counts and marquises, regardless of whether they're betrothed. If we can just charm that girl, we may be able to fix this mess...”

The king didn't pay the third princess of Zegleus any mind. She was low in the line of succession, and he figured she had only been added to the delegation to lend it the prestige of being accompanied by a royal. He thought that meant

they regarded her as window dressing. As such, the king greeted her in the throne room but proceeded to ignore her during the meeting. Doing so wasn't particularly rude—he had a higher position than her, and Count Kolbmane was the delegation's leader.

He and his vassals were right to think that the princess had little to do with the meetings. But they couldn't have known her tremendous influence over the Lightning Archpriestess.

"Huh? I'm not going to any stuffy parties," Mitsuha said.

"Hasta la vista, baby," Sabine added.

Man, Sabine's getting good at these movie quotes!

Mitsuha had been teaching Colette a few as well, but she'd have to wait to bust hers out.

"You're joking..." Count Kolbmane looked shocked.

"The invitation specified the 'members of the delegation,' right? Which we're not," Mitsuha explained.

"They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!" Sabine proclaimed.

"One is enough, Sabine! Anyway, I have a bad feeling about the party. Don't you?"

Count Kolbmane smiled bitterly. He must have been thinking the same thing. "They went through a lot of trouble to prepare this party for us, though. We can't very well ignore it altogether..."

Man, he's a nicer person than I am. But he should be nice to me, not them!

They're the enemy!

"All right, I'll call the king. 'Count Kolbmane is giving me up to Coursos, so I may very well be staying h—'"

"DON'T YOU DARE!" the count interrupted, a blood vessel bulging in his forehead.

"Thank you very much for your invitation," Count Kolbmane said.

"It's our pleasure. Please, enjoy yourselves!" the prime minister of Coursos responded formally.

The banquet had supposedly been planned so that the members of the delegation could relax and speak candidly with Coursos's bureaucrats in an informal setting, no royalty present. It was supposed to be a small, quiet event... Yet there were far more attendees from Coursos than advertised, many of whom were good-looking young men definitely not old enough to be bureaucrats. And for some reason, the king, first prince, and second prince were seated at the head of the table.

Count Kolbmane sighed. *I knew it... This is exactly what the Archpriestess and I predicted.*

The Coursan attendees craned their necks, searching among their foreign guests with puzzled expressions.

Eventually, one of them addressed Count Kolbmane. "Um, is the Archpriestess...?"

"She is out sightseeing with Princess Sabine," the count replied.

"Huh?" The man didn't seem to understand. "E-Even though she was invited

to our soirée...?”

The count put on a puzzled expression of his own. “The invitation was extended to the members of the delegation, correct?”

This only included the official members of the delegation, of course, not the maids and guards and so forth.

“Y-Yes, my point exactly! So the Archpriestess should be here, too.”

Count Kolbmane smirked. Everything was going according to plan. “I assure you, everyone from the delegation is here. The Archpriestess and Princess Sabine are simply accompanying us on this journey.”

“Huh?”

“What??”

“Noooooo!!!”

The Coursans’ plan had been utterly foiled. The king and his sons had apparently overheard this conversation as well, and they looked none too pleased. This was their all-or-nothing plan to win over the Archpriestess and get Zegleus back to the negotiating table. Anyone would be upset in their shoes.

Count Kolbmane couldn’t help but feel a little bad for them.

“Let’s head out!” Mitsuha said.

“Yaaay!” Sabine and Colette cheered.

The clerk and the other guests in the lobby smiled as they watched the three girls throw their arms in the air with glee. Totally ignorant of the fact that one was a princess and another was a viscountess, the guests likely assumed the girls had been left behind by their parents and were trying to kill time. The

clerk, meanwhile, knew their positions, but wasn't nervous around them because he'd interacted with them normally before he learned who they were.

The area around the inn wasn't particularly dangerous, but it still wasn't the best idea for three preteen girls to explore the capital in the evening without a guardian. The clerk and some of the guests were about to try to stop them when someone else broke in.

"Would you do me the honor of allowing me to escort you through our fine city, Princess?" The speaker was a nice-looking boy of about fifteen.

"Y-Your Royal Highness!" the guests and employees exclaimed in surprise.

The boy was indeed the third prince of Coursos, who had excused himself from the party, saying he didn't feel well. He was third in the line of succession and the only one of the three princes to be the son of a concubine, so though he was intelligent and kind, there was almost no chance of him ever inheriting the throne. And since his mother was not of particularly elevated status, he was unlikely to spark any political trouble, either. As such, he was allowed to more or less do as he pleased. His siblings loved him, nobles could associate with him freely, and he was considered quite a catch among noble girls with no shot at the crown prince.

D...Did they call him "Your Royal Highness"?! What the hell?! If he's a prince, he should be at the banquet! That's what my gray matter is telling me! Mitsuha thought. Well, I don't know why he's here, but that hardly matters now. What I need to figure out is which prince he is.

What? You should know by now how terrible I am at remembering faces. Why would I need to remember the face of a prince who wasn't remotely relevant to

the meeting?

“U-Um, Your Royal Highness...” Mitsuha began hesitantly.

“Oh, I’m Savas, the third prince. I’m a bastard, which means I have no shot of ever becoming king. Please, just call me Lord Savas.”

Mitsuha was grateful for the exposition, though he probably gave it because he could tell she didn’t remember him. She also got the sense that he asked them to call him “Lord Savas” not out of arrogance, but because he found it less tedious than being called “Your Royal Highness” all the time. He seemed a likable sort...which might have been entirely calculated, but it was still better than acting the haughty prince.

You know what they say—it’s better to do good with ulterior motives than to do no good at all. Someone who donates a million yen to charity insincerely is a zillion times better than a self-professed saint who doesn’t donate squat.

“What in the world are you doing here?” asked Mitsuha.

“I just told you. I’m here to escort the princess through the city,” Savas replied.

Oh yeah. He did say that, didn’t he.

He got points in Mitsuha’s book for addressing the princess and not the Archpriestess. People tended to take Sabine lightly, but she was a princess of Zegleus, and as such was the highest ranking member of their little delegation-adjacent squad. Dismissing her in favor of Mitsuha, who was just a lowly viscountess, would be an insult to the kingdom.

Savas’s kind, gentle eyes made Mitsuha feel like she could trust him. Besides, he had made his offer in the midst of a large crowd of guests, some of whom were foreigners. If he harmed the girls in any way, there was no way he would

be able to silence all these witnesses.

“What do you want to do, Sabine?” Mitsuha asked. Savas had directed the invitation to the princess, so it was hers to accept or reject.

“That would be wonderful, Lord Savas,” Sabine said with a curtsy and a smile.

Man, you wouldn't know it from her usual crude behavior, but she can really bring it when she needs to. She's smart and well educated, and she can play the perfect princess when the mood strikes... Well, I guess I shouldn't say "play." She IS a princess, hard as that is to remember sometimes.

Savas led the girls out into the city streets. Surprisingly, he knew a lot of great little hole-in-the-wall spots. He took them to a delicious restaurant (for commoners, not nobles), an archery range where children could play at target practice, a candy shop, a trendy sundries store, a souvenir shop, and more.

How does he know these places? It's not like a prince to mingle with the common folk. Did he do some research for our sake, or does he actually frequent them...?

“Hey, if it isn't Savvy! Wow, look at you with *three* cute girls in tow!”

...I see. He's clearly a regular.

“Thank you for showing us such a good time,” Mitsuha said. Sabine curtsied again, and Colette bowed her head. Savas had been just as much a gentleman to Colette as to the others, so while she was timid around him at first, she grew steadily more comfortable and ended up having a lot of fun.

...Oh, fine. This all might've been part of some scheme to win us over, but it worked—we had a great time. Guess I should give him something by way of thanks. He showed us real sincerity, and we needed to find common ground with

the Coursans anyway. It doesn't matter to me who gets the credit, so it might as well be this clever, interesting prince.

But giving it to him straight would be boring...so let's make a game of this!

“Today was a lot of fun, so I want to give you a gift as thanks. You can choose one of three options: first, our promise that the delegation for the official treaty talks will come to Coursos; second, a demonstration of the new weapons in our possession; or third, permission to kiss our hands.”

Mwahaha, he has no choice but to shame three pretty girls! I wanna see him squirm!

“Why, that's not even a question! I will kiss your hands!” Savas said.

“Huuuuuh?!”



He didn't even have to think about it! And he picked the one he definitely should not have as a prince!

Having her hand kissed didn't seem to bother Sabine at all. She was only ten years old, but she was a princess—people probably kissed her hand every day. Colette, for her part, looked like she had absolutely no idea what was going on.

I ended up feeling more embarrassed than anyone! Damn it, that really backfired!

“I’ve decided to perform a riflery demonstration tomorrow,” Mitsuha said. “And if Coursos’s king desires it, I want the delegation for the official treaty talks to include this kingdom as well.”

“Huh?” Just back from the banquet, Count Kolbmane looked startled for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure. Clarge was still staring at her open-mouthed, though. *The difference in their experience is obvious. Make sure to work on yourself so you become a refined older man, too, Clarge.*

“Where is this coming from?” Count Kolbmane asked. It made sense he was surprised. All of Coursos’s leaders had been at the banquet.

“It turns out not all of their people are idiots. The third prince is an intelligent guy, and he did his best to make up for what happened at today’s meeting by showing us around the city. I think he did it of his own accord, too, not at the king’s command.”

“Wh-What?! Y-You haven’t made any other promises, have you?!”

Huh? What’s he so flustered about all of a sudden... Oh!

“Don’t worry. I won’t let anyone marry Sabine until she’s older!” Mitsuha

assured him.

“No, that wouldn’t be up to... Er, that’s good to hear...” Count Kolbmane’s response was somewhat muddled. Sabine looked at Mitsuha exasperatedly. Colette didn’t seem to be following the conversation and was barely paying attention.

Yep, the demonstration and the delegation. My little game failed completely when he chose to kiss our hands without hesitation, and I ended up promising him the other two options as well! I’m such a sucker... But he has basically zero chance of ever becoming king. I wanted to give him at least some kind of accomplishment so he doesn’t develop an inferiority complex. I’m sure it’ll make him happy when his sisters and brothers tell him what a great job he did.

And so, the following day, they headed out for the demonstration. Savas had agreed the previous night to coordinate the time and place and make the necessary arrangements.

Mitsuha slung the case containing the M1 Garand over her shoulder and joined Sabine, Colette, and the members of the delegation on their way to the royal palace, where Savas was waiting for them. The prince led them straight to the yard where the demonstration was to take place. There was an armored dummy set about fifty yards away in front of an artificial hill, just as Mitsuha had requested. Without that, she would’ve been too scared to shoot; there would be no telling where the bullet might ricochet. They had also constructed a wooden shooting rest according to her specifications.

In the yard stood a crowd of spectators, comprised of everyone who had attended the preliminary meeting: government ministers, military personnel, the king, and the first and second princes.

“All right, I’m going to give you a demonstration of what these new weapons can do. Watch closely,” Mitsuha said to Savas, indicating that he should back up a bit before unslinging the gun case from her shoulder and opening it.

What about the king and the others, you ask? I’m ignoring them completely. Their very presence is triggering me... Get it?

Mitsuha was performing this demonstration for her friend Savas. The spectators who happened to show up were none of her concern, especially not the person who had belittled her by calling her “girl” and quashed the negotiations with his selfishness.

Furthermore, the delegation for the official treaty talks would only be dispatched to Coursos if the king specifically requested it. It was *his* fault that the talks broke down, so he would have to be the one to do something about it. All Mitsuha had told Savas was that they would think about sending the delegation if they got a request from a person with the proper authority. And the only person with that authority was the king.

It was unlikely the king of Coursos would actually apologize, but requesting to join the alliance more or less amounted to the same thing. *Not that I care either way...*

Just like last time, Mitsuha faced the target, rested the barrel on the platform, put the side of her hand on the bolt, and pulled back as hard as she could. Sabine and Colette grabbed Savas’s hands and pulled him back a little farther. In reality, Savas had been fine where he was—this was just a little performance to demonstrate to the crowd how close he was with Sabine. Becoming close with the third princess of Zegleus and the Lightning Archpriestess was sure to raise Savas’s stock at least a little. The king might even overlook his escapades into the city...though he was basically in the middle of an escapade right now, so

perhaps his father simply didn't care.

Mitsuha took a single 7.62 mm NATO bullet out of her pocket, loaded it into the chamber, pulled the bolt slightly with her thumb on the follower, then closed the slide forcefully when she felt the lock release. Next she engaged the safety. Resting the barrel on the platform, she took aim, released the safety, aimed again, and slowly, slowly pulled back her finger until...

Bang!

"Please check the dummy, Your Highness," Mitsuha said. There were two other princes in the yard that she could have addressed as "Your Highness," but they were irrelevant. Today, Savas was their host.

The third prince nodded and walked toward the armored dummy, Mitsuha following with gun in hand.

"...Incredible..." Some of the other spectators also confirmed that the bullet had pierced the armor, but they remained stubbornly silent, so it was Savas who spoke up. *Yup, Lord Savas really knows how to treat a person right!*

"...So anyway, the countries in the alliance are gonna produce these weapons and distribute them to their soldiers to be carried in addition to swords. Coastal countries will also build warships that'll carry cannons, which are like guns but hundreds of times more powerful. It's all gonna be pretty costly, but I guess Coursos won't have to worry about that. What a relief, right?" Mitsuha said with a wide smile—which no one returned, for some strange reason.

The M1 Garand's slide remained open because Mitsuha had only loaded a single bullet instead of a clip, leaving the chamber empty after one shot. She closed it and put the rifle back in its case, and just as she was slinging it over her shoulder, someone called out to her from behind.

“Wait, I want to talk!”

It was the king. Mitsuha had been sure he would just send one of his ministers.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Mitsuha responded curtly.

“Huh?” This was probably the first time in his life anyone had spoken to the king that way.

“If you have business with the Goddess, go to a church and pray. If you have business with me, find a mediator. You are no longer welcome to speak to me directly.”

“Wha...”

The princes, ministers, and even Savas were just as dumbfounded as the king. The tension was palpable.

Eh, I doubt they're gonna strike me down on the spot. And if they do attack, I can just jump away. Count Kolbmane would hopefully distract them from my disappearance by yelling "How dare you try to harm the Lightning Archpriestess!" or some such. The king's unlikely to go that far, though.

Mitsuha and Count Kolbmane had of course discussed beforehand how they would present her role to Coursos: she was separate from the delegation, and her status as a messenger of the Goddess meant they had no authority over her. This in turn meant that the delegation could not take responsibility for her actions, no matter how hard a line she took with the king. The count could use this to demonstrate that taking a hard line with Zegleus would only worsen Coursos's position.

I opposed this plan, just so you know. It seemed a little too risky to me, but I couldn't do anything about it once Count Kolbmane made his decision. I may not

have to obey the delegation, but the king told me that when it comes to the negotiations, I can't ignore the count's decisions.

Mitsuha turned to the King of Coursos and pointed at Count Kolbmane. That should be enough for him to figure out what to do.

“Thank you very much for everything, Prince Savas. Until we meet again!” Mitsuha and the girls walked off at a steady pace. No one moved to stop them.

“Ahh, it's finally over!” Mitsuha exclaimed back at the inn, giving in to a full-body stretch.

“You went way too far, Mitsuha! I thought I was going to faint!” Sabine chided her. She looked upset.

“Your father said he doesn't care if talks with Coursos fall apart, remember?” Mitsuha replied. “And Coursos's king would have to be insane to harm a foreign delegation and their companions—especially when those companions are a princess of the realm and the Lightning Archpriestess. He'd be dooming his kingdom to destruction.”

“And I'm saying, I thought you were going to make him so angry that he *went* insane and attacked us anyway! Royals don't just allow people to insult them in public like that! *Epecially* not kings! I'm impressed he kept it together...” Sabine said knowingly.

“Huh? But Count Kolbmane—”

“I think that he truly intended to anger the king, and figured you could just jump us to safety. I don't know if he was trying to bait the king into attacking a messenger of the Goddess in front of a crowd of witnesses, or if he planned to throw himself in front of you to shield you from harm, but either outcome

would have been very advantageous for us.

“And assuming I’m right, I think he’s figured out that you can use traversal without harm to yourself. When the delegation was attacked in Dalisson, we made it to the capital and back way too quickly to have traveled by normal means.”

“Huh...”

“You’re so naive, Mitsuha. That’s why you need me by your side always...”

So let me get this straight. Count Kolbmane tried to get me attacked AND he knows my secret?! You’ve gotta be kidding me!!

Bonus Chapter

Let's Eat Seafood!

Mitsuha decided to do some work on her harbor. She wanted to remove the rocks from the seafloor to make it deep enough to anchor the captured ships, and then use those rocks to create a breakwater. The plan was to remove the rocks carefully and cleanly so as not to upset the surrounding seafloor and muddy the water, which would drive away the fish, but something occurred to her before she began—all the shellfish, seaweed, and other edible marine life that inhabited the area she was excavating would go to waste.

All right, I'll have to make good use of it!

Mitsuha went to the harbor in the dead of night to get started. She carefully examined the seafloor to study the size of the rocks and how they would fit together when she used them to create her breakwater, then excavated them with a series of world-jumps. She only spent a millisecond on Earth before jumping back to her domain. *Did you know light travels 186 miles in one millisecond? How crazy is that!* Mitsuha jumped back so quickly because she didn't want the rocks to hit the ground and leave behind inexplicable traces. She chose the coast of an uninhabited island, but someone probably owned it, and she didn't want to harm the environment.

Before jumping back to the other world, Mitsuha also made sure to leave behind the marine life she had brought with her. She excluded the bugs, bacteria, and parasites with her first jump so that Earth wouldn't be

contaminated by any dangerous organisms, and she didn't take anything above the seafloor to avoid bringing any fish or other creatures that could swim away. After she jumped back with the rocks, the marine life sank gently in the ocean—she made sure to deposit it over water so the shellfish didn't fall to the ground and break or die on impact.

Mitsuha put the rocks in place to form her breakwater, then jumped right back to the beach on Earth. From there she jumped to the rear garden of her county residence with the marine creatures in tow.

“AHHHHHHHHH!”

I wish I could tell you that scream was from someone who saw me appear out of nowhere in the middle of the night, but no... That was me. I was not ready for just how big this pile was going to be...

The mountain of grotesque creatures, many of which she had never seen before, squirmed in the starlight.

What the hell are these?! How are there so many?!

Windows lit up throughout the residence in response to her scream, and a stream of people dashed out the back door. Willem led the pack, clutching his sword in its sheath; he hadn't even taken the time to buckle it at his waist. Sven and the other former mercenaries were next, followed by Anton and a group of maids and chefs holding mops and kitchen knives.

Everyone other than Willem and the mercenaries is in their pajamas! That's indecent!

...But I'm touched they were so concerned about me.

Mitsuha faced everyone, got down on her hands and knees, and said, “I'm so

sorry!!”

As a noble and their employer, prostrating myself like that might’ve been a bit much. I need to act the part...

Anton gave her a long scolding afterward.

You’d think he was my boss... Urgh...

“I see,” Anton said. “So you were using divine power to construct the harbor, and decided to bring these sea creatures back with you...”

“Yeah, I thought it would be a shame to let them go to waste. Great idea, right??”

Mitsuha’s explanation only brought on more scolding, though.

Oh, come on! But...I guess I can’t blame him for telling me to take better care of myself, and insisting I consult him about things like this. I did lead them all to believe that using divine power consumes my life force, after all. I really am sorry!

Those who were carrying lamps held them up to illuminate the mound of strange, wriggling creatures—the sight of which caused some of the maids to collapse. After the others made sure they were okay, everyone got to work sorting the creatures into piles. Mitsuha told them they should go back to bed and do it in the morning, but they snapped at her:

“After you woke us up like that?! We couldn’t go back to sleep if we tried!!”

Sorry again...

The next morning, the villagers who went to the harbor were surprised to find

that a breakwater had appeared overnight and the coastal ground had been leveled. It was hardly a mystery who was responsible for this, however, so they just offered a prayer toward Mitsuha's residence then went about their business.

Yeah, it's gonna take more than that to shake them at this point. It's scary what you can get used to... Well, they'd be more surprised if they could see what I did to the seafloor. I'll have to tell them I excavated it at some point.

Afterward, Mitsuha sent her maids to the fishing village to announce that she was hosting a thank-you party for them at her residence that evening, and that the villagers should bring their families...and come hungry. The maids also delivered the message that Mitsuha wanted a few experts on undersea creatures and seaweed to come right away, and that they would be paid.

Four fishermen arrived at Mitsuha's residence shortly thereafter.

"I want you to sort these into four categories: those that are harmful and should be tossed, those that can't be eaten but should be returned to the ocean, those that are edible but gross, and those that are edible *and* delicious. I also want to know the best way to cook them, and I'd like your help with that, too."

The flabbergasted fishermen stared at the mountain of sea creatures and seaweed, still largely unsorted, and at the row of boxes containing everything that had already been gone through. The edible ones everyone knew, like turbo sazae, abalone, sea urchin, kombu, and wakame, had mostly been separated out the previous night, but Mitsuha's household staff had avoided anything they didn't recognize. There was no way to know if they were poisonous or dangerous to touch—this job required specialists.

“The heck is this...?”

“Beats me...”

“Let’s throw it back. What about this one?”

“Don’t see those too often, but my old man used to eat ’em. They’re nice and chewy, an’ damn tasty.”

“Gah, this here’s lethally poisonous!”

“This seaweed’ll give you the runs...”

“These look like gooseneck barnacles... How’d ya get so many o’ these little guys...?”

They’re making quick work of this pile. I was right to entrust it to the pros.

There were creatures even the pros didn’t recognize, of course, but these they put in the “return to the ocean” section. They were also going to put back the creatures that were poisonous but vital to the ecosystem.

Shellfish could survive about half a day on land, and Mitsuha had brought the seaweed roots and all, so there was no need to fear them dying as long as they poured seawater on them or kept them immersed in barrels.

“Lady Mitsuha, this is way too much for the people of the fishing village alone to eat. It’s too much to preserve, either. Whadda you think of having some tonight, saving some to eat over the next few days, leaving some to be processed and sold to the town and the other villages, and putting the rest back in the ocean?” one of the fishermen asked.

I had a feeling this would be too much for the party... Huh? You’re wondering why I don’t just invite people from the town and the other villages to the party? Holding that large of an event on such short notice would be impossible. We

wouldn't be able to prepare all the food in time. Plus, seafood is the bread and butter of the fishing village—I can't just spread it around to the rest of the county for free. That would be unfair, unless I gave away crops from the farming villages, meat from the mountain villages, and products from the town as well.

So yeah, this banquet will only be for the people of the fishing village and the staff of my residence. Between the harbor construction, taking in the captured ships, and the need to keep up with the rapidly developing fishing technology, the people of the fishing village are gonna have their work cut out for them. I'm throwing this party to thank them in advance and lift their spirits.

This seems like the perfect opportunity to break out some booze from Micchan's place, too. Party time!

The guests arrived for the party that evening. The population of the fishing village was forty-seven—actually, it had dropped to forty-six when Ninette moved into Mitsuha's mansion to work as a maid—and there were twenty-eight people in the residence including Randy and the children he employed, which added up to seventy-four guests in total.

This is gonna be a blast! I'm lifting my personal ban on Japanese seasonings, so we'll use soy sauce, miso, spices, salad dressing... I don't like to overuse products that weren't made in this world, but I can give myself a pass today! ... Though really I'm just afraid I wouldn't be able to make seafood that tastes any good without them!

On the beach, Mitsuha set up a barbecue, a simple wood stove with a pot of boiling water, a small grill for cooking food on skewers, and a table with blanched seaweed salad and bottles of sauce and dressing. She told everyone to bring their own bowls—disposable paper would've ruined the atmosphere.

The turbo sazae were the type without spines, and Mitsuha grilled them in their shells on the barbecue. Turbo sazae weren't poisonous, but they could carry dangerous bacteria...though fortunately Mitsuha had removed all those microorganisms when she world-jumped, so that wasn't a concern. She didn't know if it was true or not, but she had also heard that turbo sazae from more southerly climes consumed poisonous coral, and so eating their internal organs would give you diarrhea. There didn't seem to be any coral in the region around the harbor, though, so in this case it was probably safe.

Mitsuha also prepared abalone, sea urchin, some clam-like bivalves, and gooseneck barnacles. The latter are known as "turtle claws" in Japan because that's what they look like, and are unusual in that they're crustaceans but lack a means of locomotion.

Typically you boil them and then peel off their calcareous shells before popping 'em in your mouth. They're extremely addicting. Gooseneck barnacles are eaten in Japan, too—you can sometimes find them at izakayas. I've had them before myself. Though not at an izakaya, of course.

The fishermen were used to eating at least some of their seafood raw, but Mitsuha decided to cook everything because there would be children present whose immune systems weren't used to that. That wasn't strictly necessary since she had removed the bacteria, parasites, and poison with her first jump, but she wanted everything to taste as good as possible for the party, and anyway, you can't be too careful.

Mitsuha also prepared a seafood hot pot and brought barbecue sauce, soy sauce, and dressing for the seaweed salad. And because she thought shellfish might not make for a satisfying meal on its own, she brought vegetables, steak, sausages... *And let's not forget the most important item on the menu.*

“I’ve supplied a collection of rare foreign alcohol,” Mitsuha announced. “Drink to your hearts’ content!”

“YEEEEAAAAHHHH!!”

Mitsuha didn’t sell alcohol from Earth at the store she operated in her domain. She didn’t want her citizens getting addicted and drinking their lives away, and her store would’ve been flooded by merchants from other territories and servants sent to buy it for nobles. Someone might even try to buy it all up and resell it. Usually, the only time she brought any over to this world was when she was hired to supply food and drink for parties in the capital. She was making a rare exception for this feast.



“Okay, let’s get this party started!”

“Man, that hits the spot!”

“What’s this sauce?! It’s unbelievably delicious!”

“What’s the flavor in this stew? Fish sauce? No, that’s not it... I can’t tell at all!”

“Meat! Meeeeaaaaaaat!!”

Once the men had filled their stomachs, they began to drink.

Micchan’s dad doesn’t question it anymore when I put in a huge order for booze. It’s clearly way more than I could drink alone, so he trusts that I’m buying it for work. Plus, he’s making a lot of money off me, so it’s not like he’s gonna complain...

Mitsuha had heard that some nobles were grossly inflating their orders for parties they gave, then putting the leftovers in storage to drink over time. This scuttlebutt came to her via the network of maids she had formed using gifts of Japanese sweets. Anyway, as long as the nobles weren’t overtly reselling the booze, she didn’t really care.

For this party, she had supplied thirty bottles of the Yamano alcohol the nobles prized so highly. There were forty-six villagers, but that included women and children, so not everyone would be drinking. Those who wanted to drink would have plenty.

Shortly after the men started drinking, the party fell eerily silent.

Ahh, the booze is so good it’s shut them up entirely... Whoa, they’re really

wolfing it down! That's not beer, it's distilled liquor! The alcohol content is really high!

Eh, I guess it's fine. Their families can drag them home if they pass out... Never mind! The wives have started drinking, too!

Hey, you put that down! That's not for children!

It wasn't long before the party descended into chaos, and most of the villagers and staff of Mitsuha's residence didn't wake up until past noon the next day.

...How am I feeling? I'm totally fine because of my slow-but-steady healing ability. Why do you ask?

Afterword

Hello again, FUNA here. Thank you very much for reading volume three of *Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement!*

Initially it was determined that only season one—which ended with the neat conclusion of the previous volume—would get printed in book form, but thanks to all of your support, season two is coming out as well! There’s even gonna be Korean and English editions!!!

This couldn’t have happened without all of my wonderful readers. Thank you all so much!

Sabine: “Korean? Can you teach me that, too, Mitsuha?”

Mitsuha: “Isn’t learning Japanese and English hard enough already?!”

Mitsuha traveled to new countries in volume three, and volume four will take her to a whole new continent as she invades the country with which the kingdom of Zegleus is at war! (Not that the country in question even knows that yet.) She also finally opens a business on Earth. And there’s something strange about her new employees...

Mitsuha: “Urk, the enemy is too strong! I don’t see how I’ll ever beat them... Damn you, tax office!!”

The third volume of the *Saving 80,000 Gold* manga, and the fourth novel and third manga volume of *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* are coming out on the same day as this book (in Japan, anyway)! It's a FUNA festival, and the people are loving it!

I'm gonna go look for the fourth volume of *Potions*. And then it's off to the comic book store!

Colette: How does he know people are loving the FUNA festival? Those volumes haven't even been released yet.

Sabine: Shh, we're not supposed to point out things like that! It's in our contract!!

Check out the newest chapters on the webcomic magazine, Suiyobi no Sirius (http://seiga.nicovideo.jp/manga/official/w_sirius/)! The release day has been changed to every second and fourth Friday.

...Hey! That's a promotion, not a demotion!

Anyway, *80,000 Gold* has broken through the third volume barrier and attained further publication. Sales for the series have also received a bump thanks to the anime adaptation of another one of my works, *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?!*

...One step closer to my dream...

My sincerest thanks to my editor, the illustrator, the cover designer, the copyeditor and proofreader, the printers, distributors and bookstore staff, the administrators of *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, everyone who pointed out errors and gave me advice in the comments section, and of course, everyone who picked up this book.

Thank you so much!

I hope to see you again in the next volume...

FUNA

FUNA

Debuted as a novelist with *Didn't I Say to Make My Abilities Average in the Next Life?! (Earth Star Novel)*.

Also publishing *I Shall Survive Using Potions!* with K Light Novel Books.

Manga, novels, anime, and games.

You've all become a part of me, you're all supporting my work. Nothing in life is pointless!

Thanks to my wicked friends who invite me to play airsoft and eat while walking!

Illustrator

Touzai Lately my greatest joy has been steamed vegetables.

Saving 80,000 Gold in Another World for My Retirement 3

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